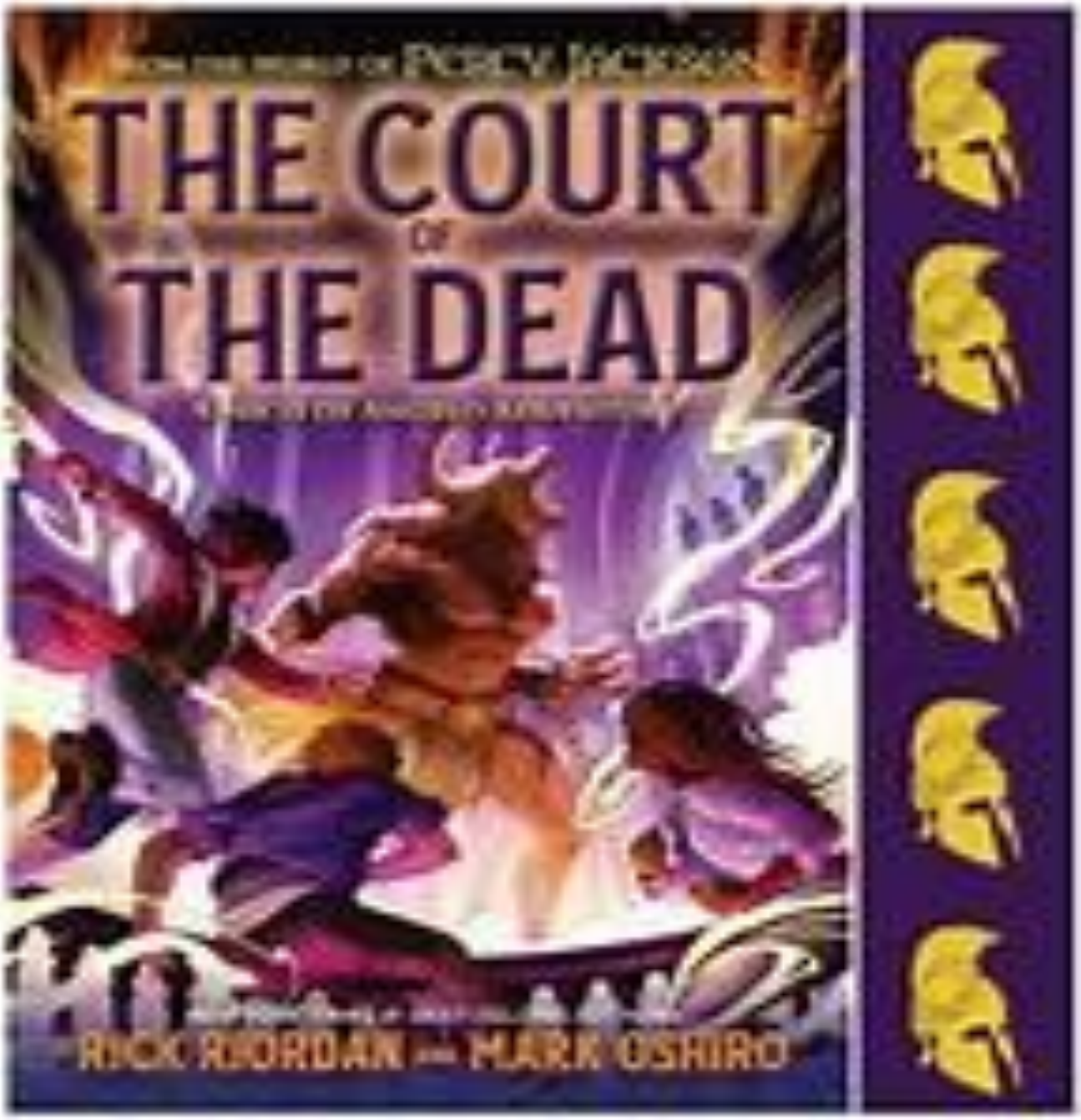
FROM THE WORLD OF PERCY JACKSON
THE COURT OF THE DEAD
RICK RIORDAN AND MARK OSHIRO

FROM THE WORLD OF PERCY JACKSON

THE COURT OF THE DEAD

A NICO DI ANGELO ADVENTURE

RICK RIORDAN AND MARK OSHIRO

Disney • HYPERION LOS ANGELES NEW YORK

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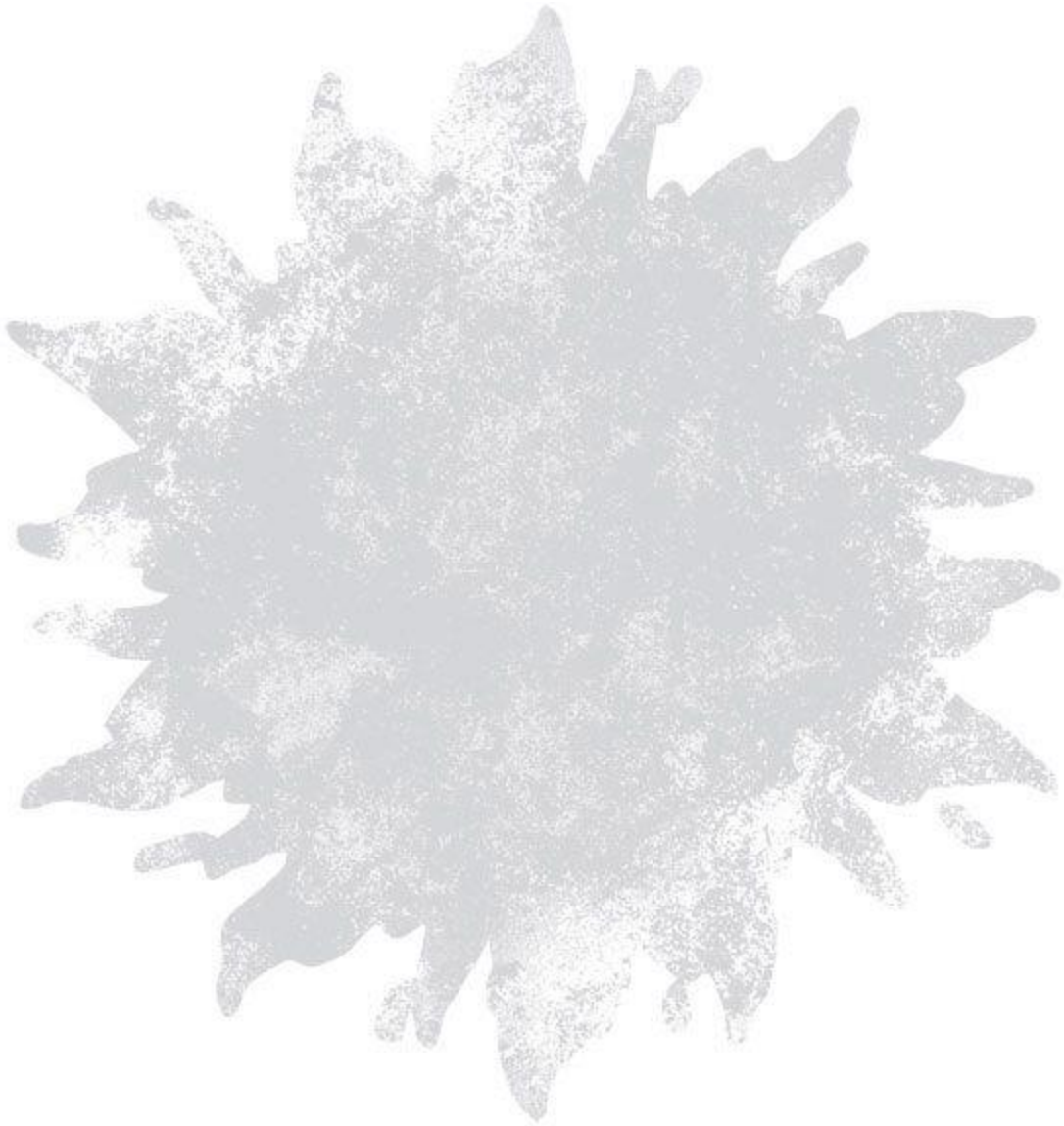

“Breathe, Nico.”

Nico sat across from Dionysus, who smelled strangely of cinnamon rolls. The son of Hades tried not to let that distract him. He breathed in deeply, filling his chest so full of the icy air rolling off Long Island Sound that he thought he might burst. Then he exhaled slowly and opened his eyes.

Mr. D’s curls rippled in the breeze. He and Nico were both sitting on yoga mats on Fireworks Beach, and the sun was close to setting. The cold didn’t bother Nico much—his black bomber jacket was warm enough. But Mr. D had on a bright pink parka, a matching beanie with a pom-pom on top, and thick ski gloves. Nico thought it was overkill. Did gods even feel cold? But he also knew that Mr. D would seize any opportunity to wear the most garish outfits imaginable.

Nico was uncomfortable for a different reason: these sessions with the camp director were so *awkward*. After Nico and his boyfriend, Will, returned from Tartarus nearly three months ago, Mr. D had expressed interest in starting “something akin to what humans call *therapy*” at Camp Half-Blood. Nico had approved of the idea because he knew that when demigods first arrived at camp, they often needed help facing the new reality of their lives. He remembered what that had been like all too well.

Yet this was not how he had imagined “therapy.” The breathing exercises seemed pointless. Mr. D had asked Nico to keep a journal of his daily emotions, but it hadn’t stuck. The god often exhorted Nico to “live in the present,” which didn’t make a whole lot of sense to him. He wasn’t a time traveler, just a shadow-traveler.

Still, Nico *was* trying to take this seriously. He fixed his eyes on Mr. D’s hot-pink outfit, which should have been enough to keep anyone’s attention in the present. Then he heard a rustling nearby and glanced to his left.

At the top of the closest sand dune, a tiny army of puffy dark beings peeked out from behind the tall grass. The Cocoa Puffs.

Nico could tell the cacodemons were trying to be quiet, but since they were personifications of Nico’s inner struggles and trauma, they didn’t do “stealth” very well. They also hated to be separated from him.

Mr. D was still practicing his breath work. His eyes were closed. Maybe he wouldn’t notice them….

Dionysus cleared his throat. “Nico,” he said, “why are they here?”

Busted.

“Would you prefer they wander around the cabins?” Nico asked. “Maybe give random flashbacks to all our new campers?”

Mr. D frowned. “Hmm. Perhaps not. I’m still adjusting to the presence of these Chaos Puffs of yours.”

Nico waved at the cacodemons to come on over. They bounded and rolled down the dune like inkblots escaped from a Rorschach test, making little yipping sounds like “Yay! Yay! Yay!” as they crowded around Nico.

In truth, Nico and Will were still adjusting to their presence, too. A couple of months ago, Fear had given Will a panic attack just by brushing against his ankle. Anger had wandered through a grove of nature spirits and caused a fistfight between two normally peaceful mulberry bushes.

As they got more comfortable existing outside Nico’s body, the Cocoa Puffs were triggering relevant emotions in anyone they encountered. Mr. D thought it might be their way of connecting with other living beings as they explored further and further. “Perhaps this is how the little blobs communicate.”

Little blobs? Some of them had antlers! Legs! Glowing eyes! How dare he call them blobs!

Actually, Sadness *did* look like a blob as it rolled up Nico’s shoe and onto his knee. He ran his hand over its back and marveled at its impossible softness, like a pillow made of smoke. Then the wave of emotion hit: a surge of sadness, complete with memories of his sister Bianca fading away and his mother dissipating into darkness.

He pulled his hand away, and the images vanished.

Mr. D uncrossed his legs. “I see we’re done for today. You’re not paying attention anymore.” He stood and began rolling up his yoga mat. “For our future sessions, I’m going to institute a no-Puffs rule.”

“Fine.” Nico rose, spilling half a dozen cacodemons from his lap. “Maybe I’ll train them to perform for a traveling circus instead.”

“Have you ever actually seen a traveling circus, Nico? You’d fit right in.”

The demigod rolled his eyes. “Please. They couldn’t handle me.”

The two began their walk back to camp, the Cocoa Puffs yipping and bouncing along behind them.

As they crested the dunes, Mr. D cleared his throat. “Nico, I know these lessons are challenging for you. You’re not used to being still.”

“Being still is overrated.”

“Hmph. Imagine how *I* feel being trapped in this place.” The god gestured at the valley spread out before them.

Camp Half-Blood never failed to take Nico’s breath away. Even now, in the dead of winter, the fields were lush and green. The marble Greek buildings—dining pavilion, amphitheater, arena—gleamed white in the sunset. Nestled in a clearing in the woods, the campers’ cabins made a wide rectangle around a central green, where the firepit blazed cheerfully. If you had to be “trapped” somewhere as a god, forced to work off a century of community service for disobeying Zeus’s orders, being the director of Camp Half-Blood seemed like a pretty good gig. But Nico knew better than to say that to Dionysus.

The god brushed a speck of sand off his ski parka.

“My point being,” he continued, “I do think you’re making progress. I just want to make sure you’re better trained before we start teaching the other campers how to deal with stress, flashbacks, fear. Every exercise I show you has a point, I promise.”

“I know.” Nico’s shoulders drooped. “It’s just so…*new* for me. Learning to breathe, being still, and all that. We haven’t had a single quest or conflict in months.”

“And I am sure you feel antsy, Nico. But after what you and Will experienced this past fall, you deserve a break.” Mr. D was quiet for a moment, and then he added, “There’s nothing wrong with slowing down.”

Nico wasn’t so sure about that. The last time his life had “slowed down,” he’d gotten stuck in the magical Lotus Hotel and Casino and missed most of the twentieth century.

He and Mr. D cut to the west of the canoe lake and walked past the cabins. Soon, they heard the sound of a whizzing arrow thumping into a hay-bale target. Will Solace stood with Juniper, one of the camp’s dryads, staring down range at the shot he’d just taken.

They made quite a pair, wwlike she might get blown away by a strong breeze, but she carried herself with confidence. She was clearly the one giving the lessons.

Will was taller, built like a surfer. Today he wore faded jeans and a blue hoodie that contrasted nicely with his mop of shaggy blond hair. He held a bow against his right side and frowned at the target, obviously not happy with his aim.

Seeing them together, Nico felt an irrational twinge of jealousy. *Hey, that’s my incredibly handsome boyfriend. Back off!* Then Will saw him approaching and gave him a huge grin, and Nico’s misgivings melted into plain joy.

“Nico!” Will called.

My gods, Nico thought. He still couldn't believe there was someone in the world who always looked so delighted to see him. How had he gotten so lucky?

"I'll make the shot this time," Will told him. "Watch!"

He nocked another arrow and pulled back the string.

"That's right," said Juniper at his shoulder. "Picture where you want it to go with your mind's eye."

Will loosed the arrow. It flew through the air and penetrated the outermost ring of the target.

"I imagined it that way," he said quickly. "Totally intended it."

"It's better than last week." Nico gave his boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. "You weren't hitting the target at all then."

Will blushed. "I know. I can't believe it's taking so long for my archery skills to improve. Hopefully my dad isn't too embarrassed by me."

"I'm sure he's rooting for you," said Juniper. "Soon you'll be hitting a bull's-eye! Or…if not soon, eventually."

Will grunted. "Not that comforting, Juniper."

"Join us for dinner, child of Apollo," Mr. D boomed. "Your presence will help the new campers adjust."

"New ones?" Will handed his bow to Juniper. "You mean the ones from last week?"

"Sadly, no," said Dionysus. "According to Chiron, three more demigods arrived just this afternoon."

"Three more?" asked Nico. "Already? And it's not even summer."

"You can blame Percy Jackson for that." Mr. D threw his hands in the air. "If he hadn't made his dramatic little speech up in Olympus about all the minor gods deserving respect and their own cabins, *I* wouldn't have to be dealing with this influx of offspring! All of you would have grown up and left, and I could have turned Camp Half-Blood into Camp Me Time."

Will grinned. "You love us, and you miss us when we're gone."

"Not you, Solace," Mr. D shot back. "Never you. Not once, not ever."

Will booped him on the nose. "You're so cute when you pretend to hate us."

Nico gulped, waiting for Mr. D to transform into a fiery pillar of wrath and disintegrate them all, but Dionysus just harrumphed. Somehow, Will could get away with booping the nose of a major Olympian god and still live to see another day.

During their short jaunt to the dining pavilion, Mr. D kept up his complaints about the latest demigod arrivals. Over the past few months, new kids had been showing up at Camp Half-Blood almost every week. Chiron had his hands full because of it. Since Nico and Will were the most "veteran" demigods around, they had taken on some of the orientation duties. Will had suggested they work up a song-and-dance routine. Nico had suggested Will never speak of that again.

Actually, Nico was glad to help, but something about the increasing numbers of new arrivals made him uneasy. It felt to him like part of a pattern, as if the world's magical climate had changed, forcing mass migrations in advance of some catastrophe. He hoped he was wrong….

Upon entering the dining pavilion, Nico saw the usual crowds scattered across a dozen picnic tables. It had once been the rule to sit with your own cabin, but last summer Nico had started a nonviolent resistance movement (i.e., he wanted to sit with Will). The idea caught on without much pushback from Chiron or Mr. D, and now the campers sat wherever they wanted. Some were laughing and tossing pieces of bread at one another. Others made burnt offerings to their godly parents at the firepit. Mr. D ambled over to join Chiron at the head table, where a nervous-looking satyr waited with a platter of chilled, peeled Concord grapes for the wine god.

Nico spotted the three newcomers huddled together at a corner table. A pang of sympathy struck his heart. He wondered if *he'd* looked that nervous when he first arrived.

He looked down and discovered a single-eyed sea-urchin-like Cocoa Puff—Loneliness—hanging on to his shoelace with its spiky little appendages. Loneliness was the smallest of the cacodemons, and though Nico wouldn't admit it out loud, it was probably his favorite. Maybe because he'd spent so much time with that feeling.

He reached down and the creature scuttled up his arm. It nestled at the base of his neck, sending an empty sort of wistfulness through Nico's body, but he didn't mind. It was like a visit from a longtime friend.

When Nico and Will approached the new campers, they scrambled to their feet like they'd been called to attention. They all looked about eleven or twelve years old. One was a small, pale boy drowning in a puffer jacket and jeans at least three sizes too big for him. The second was a girl with light brown skin, curly hair, and a punkish dress/jacket/boots ensemble that Nico absolutely approved of. The third was a taller boy with warm brown eyes, deep-brown skin, and black hair shaved short. He seemed to be the leader, or at least the boldest. He stepped forward and extended his hand.

“Hi, I’m Oludare!” he said, loudly enough for everyone in a three-table radius to hear him. “Olu for short. Are you Mr. di Angelo? Chiron said we’re supposed to talk to you.”

At *Mr. di Angelo*, some of the older campers glanced over and snickered.

“Just Nico.” He shook Olu’s hand, though the gesture felt way too formal for him.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Y’all can relax,” Will said, his smile radiating so much warmth even Nico could feel it. “We’re casual around here.”

Olu shifted from foot to foot. “Okay, yes. Well…my godly parent is Hestia!”

This came out at such a volume that the punk girl flinched. “Olu, please,” she said, tugging at her curls. “Keep it down.”

“Sorry!” Olu shouted. “Sorry, sorry. I get loud when I’m nervous.”

Nico offered a smile. “I get it. I was once new here, too. So…wait, did you say Hestia?” He looked at Will. “I didn’t even know Hestia *had* children. Have we ever had one of hers here before?”

Will blinked. “I…Wow. I don’t think so.”

Oludare’s shoulders slumped. “Does that mean I have nowhere to go?”

“Quite the opposite,” said Will. “Any demigod is always welcome at Camp Half-Blood. And who are your friends?”

The girl introduced herself as Ananya. Her parent was a minor Greek deity named Astraea.

“I never even met her before,” Ananya said. “Then, all of a sudden, last week, she appears in my dreams, like, *I am thy mother! Go to Camp Half-Blood!*” She shrugged. “Chiron said she’s the goddess of justice and innocence? I guess that’s cool.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of her,” Nico admitted. “But there are lots of gods I don’t know.”

“At least she claimed you!” Will said. “We used to have to wait months or even years, and some kids never got claimed at all.” He turned to the pale boy in the big clothes. “How about you?”

“I’m Noah.” He rubbed his drippy nose on his sleeve. His red eyes made him look like he’d been crying or had really bad allergies. “I’ve got some obscure godly parent, too. Do you know who Hermes is?”

Will chuckled. “The name rings a bell.”

“Dude.” Ananya turned to Noah. “Didn’t you study Greek mythology in school?”

Noah shook his head. “I missed a lot of days.”

“He’s the god with those little wing thingies on his feet,” she said matter-of-factly.

Nico held back a laugh. *The obscure wing-thingie god.* “I hope he heard that up in Olympus.”

“What’s Olympus?” Noah asked.

“Oh, we have a lot to teach you,” said Will. “But first, have you all eaten? Let’s get some food!”

They loaded up their plates with freshly baked bread, cheese, and fruit while the dryads brought over goblets of ice-cold, whatever-you-want-it-to-be beverage (nonalcoholic, of course). Once they were seated again, Oludare started rattling off a million questions. It was clear to Nico that the kids had only received cursory introductions to being demigods. They had no idea what Camp Half-Blood was for, aside from Mr. D mentioning some sort of “rigorous, painful training regimen.”

“I…wouldn’t describe it that way at all,” Will said. “But there *is* training. You’ll have to learn how to fight, how to defend yourselves, how to protect others.”

“Protect others?” asked Oludare. “From what?”

“One of the other kids told me we have to fight monsters.” Noah shrank even farther into his puffer. “Are monsters real?”

“Of course,” said Ananya. “If the gods are real, why wouldn’t the monsters be?”

“But *are* the gods real?” Noah snapped back. “I’ve never met this so-called Hermes. How do I know he’s not fictional?”

“I truly hope Hermes hears all this,” Nico muttered.

Noah frowned. “Sorry. It’s just…I’m confused. My mom said I *needed* to be here, but I still don’t understand why.”

“It’s okay.” Will reached across the table to lay his hand on top of Noah’s. “We’re going to help you.”

“Well, I’m excited,” said Oludare. “Gods and monsters? Sign me up!”

“I could always learn how to fight better,” said Ananya. “I do throw hands already, though.”

Noah pulled back his hand, which disappeared into his sleeve. “How are you both accepting all this supernatural stuff so quickly?” He pointed at a dryad serving drinks to the other campers. “I mean, she’s supposed to be a tree spirit? How do we know that’s not cosplay or something?”

“You really don’t believe?” asked Olu.

“Why should I?” Noah’s voice crept higher in panic. He looked like a turtle retreating into his puffy quilted polyester shell. “I’ve never seen anything supernatural in my life!”

At that exact moment, a sphere of light burst over their table, spinning with the vibrant colors of a rainbow. The newcomers yelped. Noah nearly fell off the bench. Even more seasoned campers turned and stared in amazement, as this was not something that normally happened at the dinner table.

Nico knew exactly what this was: an Iris-message, though he’d never seen one so large and bright before.

A voice spoke from the glowing portal: “Nico! Are you there?”

His heart leaped. “Hazel? Is that you?”

The image shimmered into focus: his half sister Hazel Levesque, looking regal in her purple robes and Roman-style armor, her dark hair braided with gold laurel leaves. Nico was delighted, but her grim expression told him this was not a social call.

“Of course it’s me,” she said. “And I’m in trouble. I need your help.”

It wasn’t easy to calm Noah, who thought he was hallucinating a floating head. Ananya scowled like she was ready to throw said hands at the apparition, while Oludare bounced up and down excitedly.

“That’s so cool!” he shouted. “Will we be able to do this? Do we have *magic*?”

“That’s a lesson for later,” said Nico. “Will, could you, um—”

“Got it,” Will said. “Come on, you three. Let’s give Nico some space.”

He helped Noah, Oludare, and Ananya gather their food and move to another table full of whispering demigods.

Inside her sphere of rainbow light, Hazel raised an eyebrow. “New campers?” she asked.

“We’ve gotten quite a few recently,” said Nico.

“Ah, well…that’s sort of why I’m calling.”

Before she could elaborate, Will rejoined the party, grinning. “It’s good to see you, Hazel! I know your brother has been meaning to reach out.” He elbowed Nico. “Haven’t you?”

Nico winced. “Totally.”

Hazel smirked. She knew Nico wasn’t always the best about keeping in touch. “It’s fine. I should’ve called earlier. I heard about your little adventure in the Underworld.”

“It was definitely an adventure,” Will said. “Maybe not so little.” He squeezed Nico’s hand. “But I think we did pretty well.”

“Pretty well?” Hazel laughed. “Will, you’re a child of Apollo, and you survived a trip to Tartarus!”

Nico patted his shoulder. “Yep, that’s my Ray of Light.”

Will blushed. “Please stop giving me nicknames.”

“Nope.”

Hazel leaned forward. Her shimmery, disembodied face reminded Nico of the face in the Queen’s mirror from *Snow White*, except without the evil. “Well, if you two can stop being heart-crushingly adorable for a second, I do genuinely need your help.”

“Of course,” Nico said. “What’s going on?”

Hazel looked away, pressing her lips together. Her long pause was worrisome. “So…there’s an issue here at Camp Jupiter. I think you two are the most qualified.”

Nico frowned. “To do what?”

“To, uh…handle it.”

Nico’s heart thumped against his ribs. Something must be really wrong. Why was Hazel being so cagey?

“What’s going on?” he asked again. “Details, please.”

She sighed. “I don’t know how much I should say over an Iris-message. You need to see it for yourself.”

“See *what*?”

Will cleared his throat. Nico glanced in his direction, and Will’s expression said it all: *Give her the benefit of the doubt*.

“All right…” Nico relented. “Just tell me—are you in danger?”

Hazel grimaced. “No, not…particularly?”

“That isn’t very reassuring.”

“Look, it’s about”—she leaned forward even more, like she wanted to share a secret, but this only made her voice loud enough to be heard at the nearby tables—“our new guests at Camp Jupiter.”

Many demigods in the dining pavilion turned to stare in their direction. It wasn’t every day a giant Iris-message sphere appeared in the middle of dinner. It *really* wasn’t often that a message came from Camp Jupiter. Until last year, most Camp Half-Blood demigods weren’t even aware that an alternate, Roman demigod camp existed out on the West Coast. Their first introduction had been when the Romans marched on Long Island and tried to wipe out the Greeks. Kind of a big misunderstanding. Relations were better now, but still distant and uneasy.

“New guests?” Will asked.

“You mean demi—?”

“Not entirely,” Hazel cut in. “Do you trust me?”

Her voice was strained. The tightness around her eyes told Nico how much her mysterious problem was weighing on her spirit.

He softened. “Of course, Hazel. Sorry. I think the overprotective side of me jumped out.”

“I appreciate that. And I can definitely use your backup. Can I just ask the two of you to come here? For a day or two, max? It’ll make more sense when you see.”

Nico grimaced. “I don’t know, Hazel. Of course we *want* to, but Will and I are kinda the only counselors left to help with the new demigods *here*. Mr. D said he needs our help.”

Hazel’s gaze seemed to drift away from him. “Oh, I’m sure he won’t mind!” she said.

Then she winked.

Nico turned around but didn’t catch whomever she was winking at. He then looked to Will, who shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to visit Camp Jupiter,” he said. “Besides, it can’t be worse than Tartarus.”

“Right,” said Hazel, her eyes shifting. “Definitely not Tartarus.”

She ducked as a blurry shape, like a chicken with fur, whizzed across the surface of the Iris-message, crashing somewhere behind her. From the sound, Nico guessed whatever it was had knocked over a suit of armor.

Nico's protective instinct flared up again. "What was that?"

Hazel reappeared in the glowing sphere, her hair blown sideways. "It's fine. I'm fine. I'll explain everything when you get here, I promise. Thank you!"

The Iris-message flickered out.

Nico frowned at Will. "That was weird, right?"

Will scratched his ear. "I mean…*weird* is kind of our specialty. I'm just excited to see the Roman camp!"

Nico wished he could feel as confident. His mind wandered back to his time at Camp Jupiter, where he was considered a son of Pluto. The Roman demigods respected him well enough. Nevertheless, they still considered him an outsider, a visitor—not part of their legion. If his sister Hazel, their top-ranking leader, was facing something she couldn't handle alone, Nico wasn't sure how much help he could be.

And yet…he had to try. He was responsible for bringing Hazel to Camp Jupiter in the first place. He remembered finding her in the Fields of Asphodel—a ghostly wisp of a spirit, drifting among the black poplar trees along with millions of others.

Unlike most souls in Asphodel, Hazel's consciousness had been intact. She'd sought him out, grasped his hand, and filled his mind with her life's story, the injustice of her death, and her intense longing to return to the world of the living. Nico saw this as a second chance—a way to save a newfound sibling, a fellow child of the Underworld, the way he hadn't been able to save his sister Bianca.

Nico had brought Hazel back from the dead, straight into the war with Gaea. Sometimes he wondered if he'd done her any favors. At the very least, Hazel now deserved all the support he could give her.

"Nico?" Will squeezed his shoulder. "You okay? You left me there for a moment."

Nico glanced down. He expected to see Sadness or Guilt tugging at his shoelaces, but none of his Cocoa Puffs were nearby. Nico's mind was churning out the dark feelings all on its own.

Focus, Nico told himself. *This has to be what Mr. D means about staying present*.

He offered Will a weak smile. "Sorry. I just wish I knew what was going on over there."

"I know." Will leaned over and kissed his cheek. He didn't ask what Nico was feeling. He didn't need to. Nico appreciated that his boyfriend knew him so well.

“The good news,” Will continued, “is that we get to *do* something about it. Let’s go talk to Mr. D and Chiron.”

By the time they’d crossed the pavilion to where the two directors were seated, it was clear to Nico that they already knew what the demigods were about to ask. Chiron was tugging pensively at his beard. Mr. D wore a huge grin on his face, like he’d just thought of a new kind of animal he could turn his enemies into.

“You demigods never fail to entertain me.” The god raised his goblet of grape juice. “Always something dramatic happening!”

Nico frowned. “Wait,” he said. “Was Hazel winking at *you*? Were you eavesdropping?!”

Mr. D slurped his juice so loudly it made Nico cringe. “My boy, everyone in the pavilion overheard that Iris-message. Besides, I still have decades left in this prison. I think I am allowed the diversion of eavesdropping on my campers.”

Chiron rolled his eyes. “That’s actually quite problematic, Mr. D.”

“Oh, pish. If that girl Hazel hadn’t wanted me to overhear, she shouldn’t have appeared in a giant glowing bubble while I was having dinner.”

“Anyway,” Will interrupted, “it saves us an explanation. We won’t be gone long. Just a day or two. That’s cool with you, right?”

Chiron didn’t look convinced. The old centaur was in “human mode” today, his stallion lower half hidden in a magical wheelchair so he appeared to be a distinguished-looking teacher with graying hair and a rumpled tweed suit. Honestly, though, Nico found this look even more daunting than Chiron in full equestrian mode, maybe because he’d had some very strict teachers when he was a kid in Italy.

“What about our three new campers?” Chiron said. “They’re in need of your guidance.”

“We can fill them in some more this evening!” Will offered. “Then we’ll leave tomorrow.”

Nico nodded. “Plus, they might benefit more from talking to two adults….”

Mr. D looked to either side, as if trying to find the “adults” to whom Nico was referring. “I’m sorry. Are you telling me to work more, Nico di Angelo?”

Nico couldn’t help but laugh. “Have you ever worked a day in your life, Mr. D?”

“That’s an egregious insult.” The camp director winked at him. “Despite the possible truth in that question.”

Chiron sighed. “Whatever the case, I’m not sure we need to have you *both* leaving if it’s not for a quest.”

Nico gave him his best puppy-dog eyes. “But a fellow demigod has asked for our help. Surely you don’t want us ignoring her in her time of need?”

“A point for Mr. di Angelo,” drawled Mr. D. “Is our venerable activities director really telling the demigods under his purview to ignore the harried, desperate call of one of their own?”

“Whose side are you on?” Chiron grumbled.

Mr. D grinned. “My own. Of course.”

Chiron scratched his beard, muttering something about unhelpful wine deities. He considered Nico’s plaintive expression. “I suppose we could handle Noah, Ananya, and Oludare’s orientation for the next couple of days.”

“I’ll teach Noah how to ride Peleus,” Mr. D offered.

Will’s eyes went wide. “You can *ride* the dragon?”

“No!” Chiron said sharply. “You can’t!”

“Not with that attitude, Chiron,” said Mr. D. “That boy Noah nearly passed away from an Iris-message. He needs to be thrown into the deep end to get his demigod legs. It’ll be fun!”

Chiron decided to ignore him, which was often the wisest strategy when dealing with Mr. D.

“Nico and Will, you two have been working very hard,” Chiron conceded. “Perhaps a change of scenery would do you good. Just stay in contact, especially if you think you’ll need more time out west.”

Despite his misgivings, Nico felt a burst of excitement. “Thank you!”

“And I’ll expect hourly reports,” said Mr. D.

Nico froze. “Wait. Seriously?”

“Of course not.” The god laughed. “Can you imagine me caring that much? Besides, my network of minions will keep me updated if anything interesting happens.” He faced Chiron. “Now, about these riding lessons on our fire-breathing dragon. Where do you think we can source an asbestos saddle?”

As the two demigods headed out of the dining pavilion and toward the cabins, Will leaned close to Nico. “Does Mr. D *actually* have a network of minions?”

“To be honest,” Nico said, “nothing about him would surprise me anymore.”

Nico wasn't big on packing. Usually, he just rushed off on an adventure and left the whole *What am I wearing tomorrow?* question for later. But Will was quick to remind him how useful his supplies had been on their journey into Tartarus.

"Imagine if I hadn't had my sun-therapy globe," Will said, stuffing his backpack with an extra hoodie and some snacks. "Or my first aid kit."

"We're going to a camp for demigods," Nico said. "They have food. They have medical supplies. We can even get you one of their purple shirts if you want."

Will grinned. "I do look good in purple. Would the shirt say *My Boyfriend Went to Camp Jupiter and All He Got Me Was This Lousy T-Shirt*?"

Nico was only half listening. He paced around the Apollo cabin, wondering what it would be like when he saw Hazel. What would she think of the Cocoa Puffs? Had their father spoken to her recently? A million questions. He was also thinking about his friend Jason Grace, the former praetor of Camp Jupiter—another blond demigod who looked good in purple. Nico had loved him like a brother, and he was now gone forever. Maybe putting Will in a purple SPQR shirt wasn't such a great idea. Nico wasn't sure his heart could bear it.

Will sat on his bed and began to roll sock pairs into balls. "I know you're restless. I imagine you want to leave right now, but tomorrow is better. Good night's sleep and all that."

Nico kept pacing.

"Hey," Will said. "Lord of Darkness."

Nico paused. "What?"

Will pushed aside his miniature mountain of socks. He tapped the bed next to him. "Sit."

Irritation flared in Nico's chest. Will was a little too good at cutting through Nico's posturing, or his attempts to avoid the truth. He meant well, though. Nico took a deep breath and settled in beside his boyfriend.

"Sorry," Nico said. "You're right. I am a bit antsy."

"You usually are before quests."

“But this isn’t a quest.”

Will nodded. “And…?”

“And what?”

“Would you prefer that it *was*?”

Nico raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Will put his hand in a blue sock as if checking for holes. “I mean that the last three months have been peaceful, right? Just hanging out. Living life. I, for one, have been happy not to be chased by murderous pigeons or pelted by acid rain on a daily basis.”

“I too am glad we’re not currently suffering.”

“But *are* you glad?”

Nico gasped. “Will!”

“Sorry, that came out harsh.” Will held up his sock puppet and ventriloquized. “Maybe I’m overanalyzing you.”

“Maybe not,” Nico said, tugging the sock off Will’s hand. “I get where you’re going. I’ve been running my whole life. From my childhood or monsters or grief. Now that I don’t have to do that anymore—”

“It feels weird?”

Nico nodded. “I know a lot of us have to deal with ADHD, but with ADHD, you find the most interesting thing, and you can laser-focus on it, right?”

“That’s how demigods are built,” Will agreed.

“But when there’s no threat, no quest…” Nico hesitated. He’d talked himself into a corner. He didn’t want to imply that Will *wasn’t* the most interesting thing in his life, or that he wasn’t deserving of Nico’s full focus.

“I’m having a hard time just existing,” he said at last. “I’m worried that I have nothing to worry about. I have no idea if that makes any sense. I keep thinking there’s some monster looming around the corner, ready to pounce on me.”

“And in a way,” Will said, “fighting a monster would be a relief. Because you’re used to that.”

Nico put his head on Will’s shoulder. “Am I broken, Doc?”

Will laughed gently. “Not even a little. But you’re about to go see your sister and a whole different set of friends. Whatever is going on at Camp Jupiter, we won’t have a quest to guide us. There’s no checklist. I’m betting it’ll be more about listening to them, reconnecting, hanging out together. Living life.”

“The hard stuff,” Nico grumbled.

“Exactly,” Will said. “The best help you can offer Hazel is just to be present for her.”

“ ‘Be present.’ ” Nico made air quotes around the words. “That’s what Mr. D is always telling me. He’s got me doing all these exercises…like if I don’t, I’ll slip into the past or the future.”

“Are you a time traveler, Nico?”

“That’s what *I* wondered! If so, I’m not using my powers correctly.”

Will grabbed his hand. “Well, I am happy to practice staying in our current timeline with you. You just have to ask.”

“Thanks, sunshine.”

Will stood. “Anyway. Not enough socks. Gotta pack more.”

Nico groaned. He slid off the bed and onto the floor. “Will, it’s only *two days*.”

“Maybe so,” Will said, “but what if we end up fighting a monster after all, and its weakness is wool socks? Then you won’t think I’m so silly.”

“The day that happens, I’ll *eat* one of your socks.”

Will tossed a rolled-up pair at him, but Nico dodged it. He lay there staring at the ceiling as Will finished packing.

Nico wondered if he was going to feel this on edge, this vigilant, for the rest of his life. There had to come a time when he could simply relax and learn to *enjoy* relaxing, right?

He still wasn’t sure.

“Oh, absolutely not.”

The next morning, Nico and Will stood outside the Big House, watching the camp’s white Delphi Strawberry Service van pull up.

Nico crossed his arms over his chest. He frowned at Chiron, who was playing cards with Mr. D on the front porch.

“I know you don’t like me shadow-traveling so far,” Nico said, “but riding across the country with *him* would take way too long!”

Argus, the many-eyed giant who was the camp’s head of security, parked in front of them. He hopped out just in time to hear Nico’s complaint.

“No offense, Argus,” Will hastened to add, “your company is wonderful, but driving from here to California would take like a week.”

Argus’s shoulders slumped. He blinked his large blue eyes—the ones all over his head, the ones on his forearms, the ones on his shins between his safari shorts and his tennis shoes. Nico wished the giant would say something—just to confirm the rumor that he had an eye on his tongue—but as usual, Argus stayed silent. He glumly held up an index finger.

“It would only take one day,” Chiron translated. “The van is quite speedy, and Argus was looking forward to the adventure. Besides, Nico, you’re correct. I worry when you shadow-travel such long distances. One of these days, you may enter the shadow world and not be able to get back.”

The centaur looked at Will for support.

Will winced. “Usually, I’d be on your side, Chiron. But this time, Nico has a point. The sooner we get to Camp Jupiter, the sooner we can help.”

“Also, I’ve come prepared!” Nico reached into the pockets of his bomber jacket. He pulled out a bag of homemade granola bars—gifts from Juniper—and a turkey-and-cheese sandwich that he’d pilfered from the kitchen. “If I start feeling faint, I’ll eat!”

“Plus, we’ll have the Cocoa Puffs,” added Will. “They’ll watch out for Nico.”

Right on cue, the ragtag army of cacodemons bounced out from their hiding place under the porch. They swarmed Nico's feet, yipping with excitement.

"Ah, but you haven't shadow-traveled with them yet, have you?" Mr. D gave Nico a sinister smile. "How do you know they won't slow you down? Or cause you to spontaneously combust mid-flight?"

"Dionysus…" Chiron chided.

Mr. D gave him an innocent look, like *Who, me?* "I'm just saying it could happen."

The wine god took a sip from a golden Capri Sun juice pouch. Nico didn't even know Capri Sun *came* in gold pouches. Maybe they had a marketing deal with the makers of divine nectar.

"Well, if I combust, I combust," Nico said. "I can think of worse ways to go."

Mr. D laughed. "That's the spirit!"

"It is most definitely *not* the spirit," Chiron grumbled. "Let's not jinx their trip before it begins."

"Oh, grow up, Chi," said Mr. D. "Live a little! Let the demigods make mistakes!"

"Hmph," said Chiron. He looked at Argus. "Thank you, my friend, but it appears we will not need your chauffeur services today after all. You can continue with your normal strawberry-delivery schedule."

Argus didn't seem to like that idea, judging from the thirty or forty stink-eyes he gave Nico, but the giant nodded, got back in the van, and drove away.

"Well!" Mr. D. tossed the Capri Sun over his shoulder. "I do hope your trip to that *wretched* Camp Jupiter goes well, boys. Keep me updated. And as for you, little demons…" He leaned forward to study the Cocoa Puffs, who retreated behind Nico with a nervous chorus of *Eep! Eep! Eep!*

"Live your best life," Mr. D told the cacodemons. "Follow your hearts. Sow chaos and discord. Bye, now!" He snapped his fingers and disappeared in a burst of glitter.

"He's never going to change, is he?" asked Will.

Chiron threw his playing cards on the table. "I doubt it. He always disappears just as I'm about to win."

Nico smirked. "I kind of hope he stays the way he is. It's entertaining." He faced Will. "You ready to go?"

Will grabbed the straps of his canvas backpack. "Ready as ever!"

“Please do be careful,” said Chiron. “I am not supposed to pick favorites among my charges, but I would be lying if I didn’t admit I have grown very fond of you two.”

Nico felt heat rise in his cheeks. “Thanks. I promise we’ll do our best.”

The activities director waved farewell. “And say hello to all our friends there for me!”

Nico waved back, and then led Will down the path toward the woods. The Cocoa Puffs followed, bumping into one another in a race to be closest to Nico.

At the edge of the forest, where the trunk of an old oak tree blocked the morning sun, they found a nice patch of darkness—perfect for stepping into the shadow world.

“Stay close, Puffs,” he said.

Grief grabbed one of his bootlaces. The rest of the Puffs formed a chain behind like they were ready to line-dance to “Old Town Road” all the way to Tartarus.

Will took a deep breath. “I’ll never get used to this.”

But for Nico di Angelo, son of Hades, returning to the darkness came as easily as thought.

He wrapped his arms around Will. Then he pictured their destination: the western entrance of Caldecott Tunnel, high in the Oakland Hills, where traffic whizzed back and forth day and night on Highway 24. Between the tunnel’s two main bores, unnoticed by mortals, stood a set of metal doors, always guarded by Roman sentries….

Nico and Will fell into shadow. The sensation was like flying blind at light speed through a sleet storm—not exactly the most pleasant thing. He worried about Will, who had never shadow-traveled this far before. Nico could feel the Cocoa Puffs dragging at his bootlace, as if they’d become heavier in the shadow world. He really hoped they didn’t pull the boot off mid-journey. Otherwise, he’d arrive in California with one shoe and no demons.

The experience was over almost as soon as it began. Nico tumbled to his knees in a stand of sagebrush. His head spun. He was dimly aware of Will crawling to one side, retching up his breakfast. The protein bar Nico had eaten earlier was also threatening to come up. The Cocoa Puffs were the only ones who seemed okay. They hopped around in the weeds, yipping excitedly, like *Again! Again!*

“Will?” Nico called.

“I’m good.” More retching. “You?”

Nico got to his feet slowly, fighting off the wooziness. “Yeah. We made it.”

In fact, Nico couldn't have gotten them any closer. They'd appeared in the median of Highway 24, in a stretch of weeds and wildflowers right at the base of the tunnel. Just outside the guardrails, cars whizzed by in both directions. To the west, foothills sloped into the flatlands of the East Bay. Beyond that, a blanket of fog covered the bay, pierced only by the towers of bridges, and beyond that in the distance, the San Francisco skyline. The air was cool and damp, scented with the pungent tang of eucalyptus trees.

Will stood, wiping his mouth. His forehead was beaded with sweat. "Wow. That view."

"Yeah," Nico agreed. "But look behind you."

Will turned. At the top of the slope, just as Nico remembered, metal double doors were fixed in the side of the hill between the concrete art deco facades of the tunnel's entrances. The doors opened, and two Roman sentries came marching toward them. Each wore full legionnaire armor: golden breastplate, plumed helmet, red cloak, with a shield and spear in either hand and a sheathed gladius at their belt. Just your average heavily armed teenagers, strolling down the middle of a highway.

That was quick, Nico thought. He wondered how the sentries had learned of their arrival. Camp Jupiter must have upgraded their surveillance system since his last visit.

The sentries saluted in unison, thumping their spears against their shields.

"Welcome, Nico di Angelo!" called the guy on the left. He had light brown skin and curly black hair overflowing the edges of his helmet. "I am Yazan. This is Savannah. We're here to escort you and the son of Apollo into Camp Jupiter."

"Wow, so *formal*," said Will, and then he promptly pitched forward into Savannah's arms. She was half his size, but somehow she managed to steady Will without impaling him with her spear.

"Oof," Will said, finding his legs again. "Sorry. Haven't shadow-traveled in a while."

"Y-yes," Savannah said, blushing furiously. "Of course."

She had a freckled face and coppery-red hair braided down to her waist. When she glanced at Nico's feet, her bright green eyes widened. "What are those?"

Nico followed her gaze.

Oh, right!

The Cocoa Puffs peered up at the girl. One of them—Defiance—rolled forward and inflated itself, growing spikes like a puffer fish. The message seemed to be *You got a spear? Big deal. Check me out.*

Yazan stepped back hastily. “Are those *monsters*?”

Nico frowned. He didn’t like it when that word was applied to the Puffs. “Not monsters. Cacodemons. They’re with me.”

Yazan seemed to think about this. His instructions had probably not included escorting an army of demonic dust bunnies into camp.

“Very well,” he decided.

Savannah scowled. “Yazan, we can’t allow even *more*—”

“They are our *guests*,” Yazan said, cutting her off. “Please, Nico di Angelo, follow us.”

Nico wondered what Savannah had been about to say—even more *what?*—but he didn’t have time to ask.

The sentries led Nico and Will up the path and through the metal doors, which slammed shut behind them. Magical torches guttered to life, filling the tunnel with an eerie purple light. The corridor sloped downward into the hillside.

Will shivered. His breath smoked in the cold air. “This is the entrance to Camp Jupiter?”

“Yep,” said Yazan.

“But…is the whole camp underground?” Will sounded worried—which was fair, considering that the last tunnel they’d been through had led to Tartarus.

Yazan chuckled. “No, no. Once we’re through the tunnel…Well, you’ll see.”

“Okay,” Will said warily. “Cool.”

He fished inside the pouch of his hoodie and produced a Ziploc bag of baked goods. He passed Nico an oatmeal raisin cookie. Then he offered the bag to Yazan and Savannah. “Helps with shadow-travel sickness,” he explained. “But I’ve got plenty.”

“Uh…I’m good,” said Savannah. She was studiously ignoring Defiance, who was dancing around her sandals, trying to pick a fight. “Snacks aren’t allowed while on duty.”

“Really?” Will looked shocked. “That’s a weird rule.”

Nico coughed. “He means to say that your rules are different here. But we respect them.”

“Yeah,” Will agreed, stuffing half a cookie in his mouth. “Respect.”

As they made their way through the tunnel, Nico was surprised how quickly his strength recovered. The cookie helped, and his nausea had passed. Now, however, he was starving.

Perhaps this was a benefit of staying in one place for months—Nico had built up enough reserved energy to shadow-travel across the country without face-planting.

"I did warn you, right?" he murmured to Will as they walked. "Camp Jupiter is more formal. Stricter. Might take some getting used to."

"I get that," Will said. "I remember Leo Valdez telling me—"

"Leo Valdez?" Yazan whipped his head in Will's direction. "You know the Great and Mighty Leo?"

Will raised an eyebrow. "Uh…yeah. I can attest that he's a great and mighty goofball."

"And sometimes a jerk," Nico added. "He likes to trick people who don't know any better into calling him the Great and Mighty Leo. Also, he doesn't tell his friends when he comes back from the dead."

"What?!" cried Yazan. "The Great—I mean Leo Valdez *died*?"

"No, he—" Nico put his hand on his forehead. "Don't worry about it. He's very much alive. Shall we continue?"

Finally, a brightness grew at the far end of the tunnel. They stepped into the sunlight, and Will gasped. "Oh. My. Gods."

Nico would always have an affinity for Camp Half-Blood. (And he certainly believed it was the superior camp, thank you very much.) But the idyllic panorama spread out below them *was* beautiful.

Much like Camp Half-Blood, the Romans' bowl-shaped valley was hidden from the eyes of mortals. Unlike Camp Half-Blood, an entire miniature society was nestled inside this ring of verdant hills.

The Little Tiber etched a glittering blue crescent around the western half of the valley, emptying into a crystal-clear lake right in the center, dotted with triremes and fishing boats.

Just across the river from where Nico stood, the fortifications of Camp Jupiter itself looked as formidable as ever: high wooden walls with sentry towers at each corner, surrounded by a moat lined with sharpened stakes. Inside the walls, identical barracks lined the Via Principalis—everything neat and orderly. Nico could see soldiers of the Twelfth Legion bustling about on their daily routines—marching in columns, polishing their armor, sparring with swords and spears. If a legionnaire from ancient Rome had materialized inside Camp Jupiter, they would have felt right at home. The Twelfth Legion had constructed their base exactly like every Roman legion had for the entire history of the empire.

To the north stretched the Field of Mars—a vast training ground that was part construction zone, part war-game playground, part postapocalyptic wasteland. Nico had almost died on that field a couple of times. The Romans took their training exercises seriously.

To the south, the vast complex of monuments and shrines on Temple Hill glittered in the sunlight. Smoke rose from the altar of the largest temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Somewhere below that, Nico knew, literally in Jupiter's shadow, crouched a much smaller shrine to Pluto—the Roman alter ego of Nico's father.

Finally, Nico's eyes drifted east, across the lake, to the real jewel box of the valley: New Rome. It was a small city, housing barely more than a few thousand, but it was built to have everything a discerning Roman citizen might want. The Forum would be full of merchants and shoppers this morning, Nico imagined, between the gold dome of the Senate House and the gleaming white Colosseum. Somewhere in the city, amid the winding streets, gardens and villas, cafés, and theaters, Nico's friend Tyson the Cyclops ran a bookstore with his girlfriend, Ella the harpy. Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase would be attending classes at New Rome University.

The idea warmed Nico's heart, but it also made him feel a little wistful. The Romans did one thing very well: they *planned*. This valley wasn't just a training camp. It offered a home for life to anyone who graduated from the legion. Demigods could live here forever, follow their dreams, get married, raise a family—whatever they wished, all in relative safety.

It was the ultimate lesson in being present, Nico thought. Staying put. Living life. All those things Mr. D had been trying to teach him. Maybe that's why the place made him feel so uncomfortable.

"Welcome to our camp," said Yazan proudly.

"You're kidding me." Will gave Nico an accusatory look. "*This* is Camp Jupiter? You did a *terrible* job describing it!"

Nico shrugged. "I still prefer our slice of woodsy chaos. But yeah, this place is gorgeous."

Savannah marched over to a nearby sentry hut. She hefted a bronze horn and blew a signal blast that echoed across the valley. A moment later, a horn answered from Camp Jupiter. The Decumanian Gate swung open, and a mounted figure galloped up the road in their direction.

Nico grinned. He recognized that brown stallion, the rider's flowing purple cloak, her praetorian armor, her long dark curls.

He was glad he'd recovered from his shadow-travel, because he actually had the energy to run down the hill to meet her. "Hazel!" he cried.

Arion, her superfast steed, covered the distance between them in seconds. Hazel swung down from the saddle with the grace of a seasoned cowhand and ran to embrace Nico.

He buried his face in his sister's shoulder and held her tightly. She smelled of sweet, freshly turned earth.

Images flashed unbidden through his mind:

Bianca in the Lotus Hotel.

His mother gazing at him lovingly.

Apollo outside the Big House.

He pulled away and discovered Grief sitting on his shoulder, its tiny appendages stretching toward Hazel as if it, too, wanted a hug. Arion whinnied in alarm. Hazel gasped and stepped back, her hand closing around the hilt of her spatha. "Nico, what is that?"

"It's okay!" Nico told her. "They're with me!"

She kept her grip on her cavalry sword. *"They?"*

The rest of the cacodemons came tumbling down the hill, followed by Will, Yazan, and Savannah.

"Hazel!" Will beamed like he was having the best day of his life. "Nice to see you again! Say hello to the Cocoa Puffs."

The cacodemons formed a bouncing, yipping semicircle of fuzzy darkness at her feet.

She took her hand off her sword hilt and knelt like she was about to pet a cute dog. "The Cocoa Puffs? Oh my gods, they're *adorable*! What exactly are they?"

"That's a long story," said Nico. "I can tell you la—"

She extended one finger toward the single-eyed, urchin-like Puff.

"Wait!" Nico said.

Too late. She touched the top of its…head? Body? Nico wasn't sure because Loneliness's whole body *was* its head. It didn't matter. Hazel's face went blank. Tears sprang to her eyes.

Nico scooped up Loneliness. More images flooded his mind—his days alone inside a giant bronze jar, his time wandering the dark corridors of the Labyrinth—but he was braced for them. He put the Cocoa Puff aside and turned to Hazel. "Sorry about that."

She wiped her eyes. "What…what just happened? I was back in the Fields of Asphodel."

“The cacodemons can trigger your memories,” explained Nico. “While we were in Tartarus, a very old god created them from my psyche. They’re basically personifications of my emotions.”

Hazel blinked. “I’ve heard and seen a lot of things as a demigod, but cacodemons?” She shook her head. “I guess there are still new things to learn in this world.”

“We’re still learning about them too,” Will said. “They seem to be reaching out to other people more often now. We think it’s their way of communicating.”

Next to Nico, Yazan shifted nervously. “I’m sorry, Praetor. Perhaps I shouldn’t have allowed the demons in.”

“No, it’s fine.” Hazel managed a smile. “My brother is welcome, and so are his personified emotions. Yazan, Savannah, you’ve done a good job. You may return to guard duty. And, Arion, thank you, my friend. I can walk back.”

The horse nuzzled the side of Hazel’s head, messing up her hair with a sloppy kiss. Then he disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Yazan hesitated. Maybe he was curious to see what would happen next. But Savannah grabbed his wrist. With a respectful nod to Hazel, and one last suspicious look at Nico, she led Yazan back up the road to the tunnel.

“Those two are new here,” Hazel explained. “Yazan’s father is Vesper, the god of dusk. Savannah is a legacy. Third generation. She’s, um, had a particularly hard time.”

Nico filed that away to ask about later. Demigods all tended to have rough lives, at least until they grew into adulthood, got fully trained, and learned to survive in the mortal world. If Hazel made a point of saying Savannah’s life had been particularly hard…it must’ve been bad indeed.

At the moment, though, he had more burning concerns.

“So, now that we’re here,” he said, “can you tell us what’s going on?”

Hazel grimaced. She looked suddenly weary, as she had on yesterday’s Iris-message. “I think it’s best if I just show you. Come on.”

As they crossed the footbridge over the Little Tiber, Will peppered Hazel with questions: How was Frank, her boyfriend and co-praetor? How had they managed to repair Camp Jupiter so quickly after the Battle of San Francisco Bay? What was her favorite meal in the mess hall?

Hazel laughed. “Wow, I’ve missed you, Will. I always feel so much more interesting in your presence.”

“Good,” he said. “Because I want to know everything.”

She squeezed his arm. “You might regret saying that. Because what I’m about to show you is a lot.” She nodded at the guards at the Decumanian Gate, and led them into the camp.

Nico’s heart began to race—partly because it had been so long since he’d been here, and partly because Hazel was being so cryptic. It wasn’t like her to withhold information.

Demigods in purple shirts crowded the Via Principalis. Some were off-duty, heading to baths or standing in line for coffee at the kiosk of Bombilo, the two-headed barista. A couple of legionnaires were scrubbing graffiti off a barracks wall, a sight that Nico found very strange. Graffiti was a major breach of army discipline. Stranger still, the white paint read NON INIMICOS LICET—Latin for *No enemies allowed.* Why would someone write that in the middle of camp?

Will didn’t seem fazed by anything until he saw his first *Lar*.

Floating toward them was a ghostly purple apparition—an older man in a toga and sandals. When he saw Will, his face turned livid. *“Graecus!”* he shouted. “Kill the graecus!”

“Theo,” Hazel chided the ghost, “we’ve talked about this. The Greek campers are not our enemies anymore. Will is our guest.”

“Hmph.” Theo sneered. “Back in my day…”

He turned and floated away, grumbling in Latin.

“Sorry about that,” Hazel told Will. “Ancestral spirits. Most of the Lares are nicer than Theo.”

“Fascinating,” Will said. “And I thought it was weird that we have a *dragon*.”

“Oh, there’s much more to come,” Hazel warned.

She led them south, away from the headquarters and shops. Nico smelled the stables before they reached them. *Then* he got a whiff of the latrines. *Gross*, he thought. Most of Tartarus hadn’t smelled that bad.

There, in the back corner of camp, stood the last barracks. It looked like all the others—a sturdy wooden structure, freshly painted and well-maintained, but the smells from the neighborhood definitely made it the least desirable location to bunk.

Hazel walked up to the door and put her hand on it.

“The Fifth Cohort,” she said. “My old home.”

Nico nodded. “Didn’t Percy stay here, too?”

“Yeah. And Jason. And Frank.”

“All the best people,” Will observed.

Hazel winced. “Most legionnaires would disagree. Historically, the Fifth Cohort has been for the demigods who didn’t fit in. It has a terrible reputation.”

“So…this is where we’ll be staying, then?” Will guessed.

Hazel seemed lost in thought. It took her a moment to answer. “No. I’ll show you your accommodations later. I brought you here because the Fifth is on patrol in the hills this morning. I figured it was the best place for him to wait.”

Nico’s insides started to form a knot. “Who is *him*?”

“I need you both to trust me,” Hazel said.

“Of course,” Will said.

“Why *wouldn’t* we?” Nico added. “Also…who is *him*?”

The ground rumbled beneath Nico’s feet, and tiny cracks appeared in the dirt. Skeletal fingertips began wriggling upward like earthworms escaping a flood. Without meaning to do it, he had started to raise the dead.

Will put a calming hand on his shoulder, and Nico relaxed. The dirt stopped trembling. The cracks closed.

Hazel kept her eyes fixed on the door of the barracks. “Just…promise me you won’t freak out.”

Nico nodded, though he was totally freaking out.

“Okay.” Hazel took a deep breath. She looked *terrified*. “Come on in.”

She pushed through the doorway and Nico followed. It took his eyes a moment to adjust from the brightness of the morning. Rows of tidy bunk beds lined the walls. In the shadows at the far end of the room, sitting on a footlocker, was a figure that Nico’s mind couldn’t quite process.

Humanoid…sort of, but this guy was way too big to be human. He looked like a bodybuilder who had swallowed three other bodybuilders. And from the shoulders up…Nico’s first thought was that the guy was wearing a massive, exaggerated papier-mâché head, like the cabezudos he’d once seen at a Puerto Rican festival.

Will pushed in behind him. “What is it? Who— Oh…” His voice died as the creature rose to its feet. Its head nearly scraped the ceiling. It filled the space so impossibly that Nico forgot his promise to stay calm. His hand drifted to the pommel of his Stygian iron sword.

“Nico, stop!” Hazel gripped his wrist. “I can explain!”

He watched in horror as the creature stepped forward. It wore nothing but a blue cloth wrapped around its torso—a bath towel? A kilt? Thick fur covered its upper body, which was so bulked-up the creature could probably have bench-pressed the Statue of Liberty. Nico's gaze traveled up to its bovine snout, the golden ring piercing its nostrils, the massive brown eyes, and the curved white horns that tapered to deadly points.

Nico was vaguely aware of the Cocoa Puffs dancing in a panic around his feet, yipping *Nope! Yikes! Nope!* At his side, Will sputtered, his mouth seemingly unable to form words.

"Hazel," Nico said at last, "is that *the* Minotaur?"

CHAPTER 4

The Minotaur snorted. “The name is Asterion, thank you very much.”

His voice was deep, smooth, and surprisingly relaxing, like the narrator of an audiobook.

“I—I’m sorry,” Nico stammered, “but you can *talk*?”

“Hmph.” Asterion lumbered toward him, making the floorboards creak. Every molecule in Nico’s body screamed fight-or-flight, but he managed to hold his ground and keep his sword in its sheath.

The bull-man crouched to be eye to eye with them. “It figures that a demigod would assume I could not speak. Have you not come across many of my kind?”

Will took a step back, almost tripping over Defiance. “Uh, you mean other minotaurs? I thought you were unique.”

Asterion twitched his large fuzzy ears, which Nico took as a sign of annoyance.

“I mean denizens of Tartarus in general,” said the Minotaur. “Surely some have spoken to you?”

“Oh…yes,” Will admitted. “It’s just that…well, no one ever mentioned that *you*, specifically, could talk.”

“I’m pretty sure Percy told us that the most you did was moo and yell,” added Nico.

Too late, he realized it might be a bad idea mentioning Percy to the Minotaur. Percy had killed the guy *twice*—once with an ax, and once with his own horn. Nico tensed, ready for a crash course in bullfighting. Instead, Asterion just nodded.

“Percy…as in Jackson.” His tone suggested grudging respect. “A formidable fighter. And you’re right. We did not do a lot of talking.” Asterion stroked his chin, which was a weird look for a bull. “I should like to make amends with Percy Jackson the next time we meet. I believe he is not far from this very spot at the moment. But he is not to be bothered.” Asterion lowered his voice as if sharing a dangerous secret. “Something about…grades.”

“Yes,” said Hazel. “Not bothering Percy would be ideal.”

Nico took this to mean *Annabeth will kill us if we interrupt them during their first semester at New Rome University.*

He rubbed his temples. He still felt a bit hazy from the shadow-travel…and now this. “Lot to take in.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “We’ve seen many things, but the Mino—”

“Asterion.” The bull-man’s voice dropped to a dangerous rumble. “Names have power, little demigod. I would greatly appreciate it if you used mine instead of referring to me by the epithet I was assigned.”

Nico trembled. He didn’t often feel afraid, but up close, Asterion was intimidating—a mountain of muscle and fur in a blue bath towel.

“Sorry,” Will said. “Won’t happen again.”

The corner of Asterion’s mouth twitched…. Was that a *smile*? “Thank you. I know you must be confused. My story…well, sometimes, even *I* cannot believe it.”

“So you’re here…why?” Will frowned at Hazel. “You’re not, like, holding him hostage, are you?”

Hazel sniffed indignantly. “Will Solace, you know me better than that.”

Asterion chuckled. “I am no hostage, my friend.” He turned to Nico. “I am actually here because of *both* of you, son of Hades and son of Apollo.”

Nico couldn’t take it anymore. He wobbled and reached for Will. “I think I need to sit down.”

Will guided him to one of the bunk beds. Then he whipped out a Kit Kat bar from his backpack. “Eat this.”

Nico obliged. Meanwhile, Asterion somehow managed to drop to the floor and sit cross-legged opposite him. The Cocoa Puffs hopped around the bull-man, warily checking him out. They seemed to be having a contest to see which of them dared to get closest. Nico felt like his mind was going to fracture at any second. Here they were, just a few friends and demons, having a pleasant chat with a killer monster from Crete. He glanced at Hazel, silently begging her to make it make sense.

“He arrived here last week,” Hazel explained, sitting beside Asterion. “One of the guards spotted him making his way down the hillside waving his, uh, surrender flag.”

Asterion pinched the fabric of his kilt/towel thing, indicating that it had served as the flag in question. Nico desperately hoped the bull-man had been wearing something else underneath when he surrendered.

“I made it myself,” Asterion said proudly. “It is customary for mortals to wave a blue flag when surrendering, is it not?”

“Um…close enough,” Nico said. “But why come here? And what does it have to do with me?”

The bull-man rested his enormous hands on his knees. His fingernails were perfectly manicured, painted blue to match his kilt. “After Percy Jackson defeated me for the second time, my regeneration in Tartarus took over a year. By the time I was made whole again, everything in Tartarus seemed changed. The Doors of Death had closed, but there was still a sense that the boundary between our world and yours had weakened…perhaps permanently. I heard stories of demigods who had survived expeditions into Tartarus and returned to the upper world.”

He paused. “Imagine how that felt—to believe that Tartarus was our realm alone, that it would mean certain death to anyone else who dared enter. And then to discover that three different demigods had successfully escaped the lowest, most terrible reaches of the Underworld!”

“*Four* demigods,” Will corrected. “I’m the fourth.” He’d been nibbling on a brownie from his Bag of Infinite Snacks, but when Asterion turned to study him, he paused, suddenly looking self-conscious. “Sorry,” Will said. “Please continue.”

Asterion lowered his head. “I began to suspect that the old rules no longer applied…. I waited to see what I would be asked to do in this new regeneration, which god or spirit might call upon me to do their bidding. But I received no summons. I wandered Tartarus, waiting for a purpose.”

“A purpose?” Nico leaned forward. He still felt dizzy, but the Kit Kat bar was starting to make its way through his metabolism, shoring up his stamina through the magic of wafers and chocolate. “What do you mean?”

“Do you know the legend of my creation?” Asterion asked.

Will took another bite of brownie. “I mean…sort of? At camp, they tell the story of how Poseidon wanted revenge on King Minos, so he cursed Queen Pasiphaë into falling in love with a white bull. And the baby was…” He gestured at the bull-man.

Asterion’s wet nostrils flared. “That much is true, unfortunately. My very birth was predicated on a trick. A terrible deception. Then, once I began to grow, my mother believed it was best that I be housed within a labyrinth.”

Hazel patted his hand, which was three times the size of hers. She glanced at Nico. “They said it was because he was too fierce and violent, tearing up the palace, eating people. But that wasn’t true. Minos and Pasiphaë just didn’t want to be embarrassed by his presence.”

Nico felt a twinge of sympathy. He knew about being stowed away, kept out of sight by a parent.

“I guess I never thought of it from your point of view,” he told Asterion. “You didn’t get a choice, did you?”

“Correct, son of Hades.” Asterion’s mouth twitched again—definitely a sad smile. Nico was starting to figure out bovine facial expressions. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. “No one asked me whether I wanted to have seven youths and seven maidens sacrificed to me every seven years! I don’t even *like* human flesh. You taste like…what do you call it? Beef jerky?”

Will shuddered. “That’s a fun mental image.”

Hazel nodded in agreement. “I haven’t eaten any since he said the same thing to me.”

“But that is not the point,” said Asterion. “I was never asked what *I* wanted to do. Not in my mortal life. Nor afterward, when I was killed for the first time and sent to the Underworld.”

“By Theseus,” Nico said.

He knew immediately he’d said something wrong. Asterion’s brown eyes turned red.

“Do not say that fool’s name in my presence.” His booming voice echoed through the barracks.

“Sorry!” Nico raised his hands in concession. “I should have figured he was a sensitive subject.”

“Did you know that nightmare of a human did not even kill me on purpose?”

Hazel leaned back. “What? I haven’t heard this part.”

“I had nearly defeated him!” Asterion huffed loudly. “Then he slipped in a pool of his own blood and accidentally stabbed me! He got lucky!”

“Am I hallucinating?” Will asked.

“No, son of Apollo,” said the bull-man. “Your mind is sound.”

“Is it?” Will whispered to himself.

The whole situation was so absurd, Nico wanted to laugh, but Asterion’s eyes still glowed like laser beams. He decided not to risk it. “So, after the Labyrinth, you regenerated in Tartarus….”

“And my existence settled into a routine,” Asterion said. “It was the same for millennia. People in power summoned me—gods, Titans, greater primordials—and sent me after their enemies. I…I killed many over the years. I was always told *You are terrifying. You are dangerous. Kill this hero. Eat that hero. Bellow and rampage! That is your job!* But after Percy Jackson, when I regenerated once again in Tartarus, there was only silence. Time stretched endlessly before me. Without any real purpose, I began to wonder: What did *I* want to do?”

The barracks filled with a tense silence.

Finally, Will asked, “Did you figure it out?”

Asterion grunted, his eyes mellowing to a warm brown. “While I may sometimes curse my birth, I am pleased that I was born with human hands.” He wriggled his banana-size fingers. “During my years in the Labyrinth, I learned that I have a natural skill for one thing….”

“Arm wrestling?” guessed Nico.

“Singing?” asked Will.

Nico and Hazel looked at him quizzically.

“Well, he has a nice bass voice,” Will explained.

“Wrong on both counts,” said Asterion. “What I excel at is…” From the back of his kilt, he whipped out two thin metal spikes. For a moment, Nico was afraid the bull-man was going to announce that his natural skill was shanking demigods. Then Nico realized he’d seen spikes like those before. His nonna in Venice had never been without a pair, along with a ball of yarn.

“Those are knitting needles,” he said.

“Indeed!” Asterion said. “I even knit my own underwear!”

With no warning, he stood and ripped off his kilt.

Hazel yelped. The Cocoa Puffs scattered.

Nico tried to shield his eyes. Surely, if the true forms of gods could make mortals spontaneously combust, monster groins could do the same. But beneath the kilt, Asterion wore a pair of hand-knit tighty-whities even brighter than the freshly painted barracks walls.

“Asterion!” Hazel cried. “Please have some modesty!”

“Hmph.” The bull-man planted his fists at his sides à la Superman. “I have no need for what you humans refer to as ‘modesty.’ Look at this stitchwork. Look at this continental purling! Besides, do you not also wear underwear?”

“Yes,” Hazel said, “but we usually wear it…under?”

Asterion grumbled and put his kilt back on while Nico looked over at Will. His boyfriend’s eyes seemed to be frozen open from the trauma of TMU—too much underwear.

“Nico,” he said softly, “do you remember Carl and Bartholomew?”

Nico nodded, picturing the two boneheaded aeternae they had encountered in Tartarus.

“This is worse.” Will shook himself like a dog trying to dry off. “So, Asterion…I mean, first of all, that’s some lovely knitting—”

“Thank you!” Asterion sat down again next to Hazel. “You know, this is the same pair I wore when I first fought Percy Jackson, but he said *nothing* about my stitchwork. *Nothing*.” He paused. “In his defense, it was quite dark that night.”

“But how did you get here?” Will asked.

Asterion glanced over at Hazel, who patted his knee encouragingly.

“I heard what you did for the Titan,” he finally said.

Nico smiled. “Bob?”

“That is his name now, is it not?” Asterion sat up straighter and pushed out his chest. “*Bob.* A noble name. Simple yet elegant, like a garter stitch.”

“But what does that have to do with you?” Nico asked.

“You are not aware of the impact you have had, son of Hades! You willingly came to Tartarus to help a Titan! You defied those great forces who would require us to serve as mindless weapons forever. You showed us another way.”

“And when you say *us*, you mean…” Nico was hesitant to use the usual term, but he didn’t know what else to call them. “Monsters?”

Asterion heaved a deep sigh. “We prefer *mythics.* The term *monsters*, you must agree, is rather…what do you call it? Loaded. Ever since we were first called that, we were given no choice but to *be* monsters. There were the occasional rebels, but they were rare exceptions. The rest of us? We were used. Manipulated. Enslaved to the whims of those who wished only for violence and chaos.”

Nico thought of Nyx in Tartarus. He remembered Bob challenging her, accusing her of not knowing it was possible to change. The goddess had felt no need to be different. *I am perfect as I am.*

Nico felt his rage building, hot and ferocious. He knew exactly what Asterion was describing. Then he looked down and found Anger chewing on his sock. The Puff looked up at him and opened its mouth—which took up most of its body—revealing hundreds of teeth.

“The sight of your demons comforts me,” said Asterion. “Your peaceful coexistence with them confirms my belief that you and Will Solace are best suited for helping me achieve my goal.”

Hazel nodded. “I agree.”

“And what exactly is your goal?” asked Nico.

The cacodemon Longing waddled over to the bull-man. Asterion patted its head, apparently unaffected by the Puff's power.

"After I heard the story of your trip to Tartarus," Asterion said, "I decided to return to the mortal world on my own. It was a difficult journey. I clawed and scraped my way to the surface, thinking that I would seek you out, Nico di Angelo, at Camp Half-Blood. But for whatever reason, my instincts brought me here instead. I emerged in the hills just above Camp Jupiter."

Hazel smiled. "I like to think it's because you have good taste."

The bull-man's laugh sounded like a revving truck engine. "Perhaps, Praetor. I watched the camp for many days before approaching. I admired their regimen of discipline. Their camaraderie. The legion exists to protect this valley and all who live in it. I wanted to be part of such a community. I felt that I could settle here safely."

"Settle?" Nico stared at Hazel. "Asterion is going to *live* here?"

Hazel and Asterion exchanged a knowing look.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Hazel said. "I do want him to stay. I think Camp Jupiter would benefit greatly from his presence."

"And I believe I would benefit from being around demigods every day," said Asterion. "I could offer knitting lessons!"

Hazel fixed her gaze on Anger, who was still trying to chew off Nico's sock. "Unfortunately, there's been pushback from some in the legion."

Nico remembered how on edge the sentries Yazan and Savannah had acted. He recalled the graffiti scrawled on a wall where everyone could see it: NON INIMICOS LICET. *No enemies allowed.*

"We've had over forty new demigods join us since you were here last," Hazel added. "That's a lot of new people to assimilate at once. A lot of instability, even before we asked our legionnaires to adjust to…" She gestured at Asterion.

"There has been friction," the bull-man admitted. "Some demigods of Camp Jupiter are…" He tilted his head as he tried to summon the right words. "They are not as open-minded as Hazel or yourselves. They avoid us. Call us names. Pick fights. And I must admit that some of us are also quick to anger."

"Hold on," Will broke in. *"Us?"*

Hazel wore the same strained expression she'd had on yesterday's Iris-message. "We're not just talking about Asterion. Others followed him here."

Nico scrunched his eyebrows together. “Others as in mon—mythics?”

“You will meet them later today,” said Asterion. “All we want is a chance to live in peace. To find a new purpose that we have chosen ourselves.”

Nico tried to process all this. It was a lot. There weren’t enough Kit Kat bars in the world to tame his headache. “So what do you need me and Will for?”

“Support,” said Hazel. “Your word means something here, Nico. You’re still the ambassador from Pluto, an honorary member of the New Roman senate. You and Will survived Tartarus. That’s…well, legendary.”

“You two changed the Underworld,” agreed Asterion. “Your defeat of Nyx and your rescue of Bob gave the rest of us hope. Many of us did not want the job of being monsters. We’ve had nowhere to go—until now.”

Asterion rose to one knee, bowing his head to Nico.

“Please help us,” he said. “I beseech you with humility. We understand why the mortals are suspicious and afraid. We too are nervous. We do not yet know how to live side by side. But you two inspire by example! A son of Apollo and a son of Hades. Two survivors of Tartarus. A bridge between worlds, if ever there was one. Hazel and I believe that no one could help transform minds better than the two of you.”

Hazel brushed away a tear, though Nico wasn’t sure if it was from love or sadness or worry. “It’s true,” she said. “I respect you both so much. And if there’s anything I’ve learned through our experiences together, it’s that sometimes you just need to ask for help!”

Nico’s vision started to blur from exhaustion. He looked at Will, but he knew what Will would be thinking. Will’s personality was composed of equal parts warmth, compassion, and optimism, with a sprinkling of humor and tasty baked goods. Of course he would want to help.

Nico wasn’t sure how he felt about being an example, much less a bridge between worlds. He was still getting used to handling the projector for the orientation film at Camp Half-Blood. But as he gazed at the bull-man kneeling next to his half sister, affection filled his heart. He knew he had to help. At least, he had to try.

“I’d be glad to,” he said. “But first, can I take a nap?”

Nico's nap wasn't terribly long, but it was deep.

He hadn't been sure he could make it to the guest quarters without falling over, so he stayed in the Fifth Cohort while Hazel, Will, and Asterion left him in peace.

His dream was hypnotic—a repeating loop of him walking through the Caldecott Tunnel, seeing daylight just ahead, and then suddenly finding himself back at the metal doors. Every time, laughter echoed through the tunnel, freezing Nico's blood. A voice called, *You cannot escape your nature, son of Hades.*

The dream reminded him of the way Epiales, the daimon of nightmares, had deceived him and Will when they were trying to enter the Underworld. But the voice was not that of Epiales. It was too cold, too spiteful even for a daimon. In Nico's experience, only mortals were capable of that much malice.

When Nico woke, his hands trembled. He was alone except for the Cocoa Puffs, who were snoring softly underneath his bunk. Nico flexed his fingers, trying to shake off the remnants of his nightmare. He should've been used to vivid demigod dreams by now, but they never got easier.

He peered over the edge of the mattress and asked the Puffs, "Could you all stay here for me? Just so you don't upset the Romans' delicate sensibilities?"

Defiance rolled over and puffed up its spines, its eyes glowing.

"I'll take that as a yes," Nico said. "Thanks."

Nico figured it must be about lunchtime, so he shuffled over to the mess hall. Even if he didn't find his friends there, he could at least deal with the yawning pit of hunger in his stomach.

Along the Via Principalis, Roman demigods did a double take when they saw him. Some saluted awkwardly. Others gave him a wide berth and whispered behind his back.

Maybe Hazel was right. His reputation meant something here. Or maybe the Romans just weren't used to seeing a guy with disheveled black clothes and an extreme case of midday bedhead wandering through camp.

The savory smell of barbecue hit him before he reached the mess hall. He said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever god oversaw grilled hickory-smoked meat.

Inside, he found lunch in full swing. Each of the five cohorts sat in their own dining area, with comfortable sofas surrounding a low table. Pitchers of iced lemonade and baskets of fresh corn bread zipped through the air, carried by invisible wind spirits—*venti*. A dozen glowing purple Lares mingled with the living, offering free lectures about the Good Old Days and occasionally trying to grab goblets of lemonade before remembering that they were ghosts.

At the officers' table, in front of a row of Roman battle standards, Will and Hazel were in the middle of an animated conversation. Hazel waved to him. Nico really wanted to load up a plate of BBQ, but he drifted over to join them.

"Sleep well?" Hazel asked. "I just finished giving Will a tour of New Rome."

"Nico, they have a perfect replica of the Circus Maximus!" Will said. "And the lake is crystal clear, and the perfect temperature for swimming!"

"Well, we have the *ocean* at our camp," Nico said as he sat down.

Hazel stuck her tongue out. "Don't be jealous."

"Jealous of Camp Jupiter?" He cackled. "Ours is the superior demigod camp."

"All right, you two, play nice." Will poured Nico some lemonade. "By the way, I contacted Mr. D and Chiron while you were asleep."

Nico winced. "Thanks. I forgot about checking in with them."

"Don't worry. I explained the situation. They said they could handle the camp for as long as we needed."

"I'm sure Mr. D was incredibly annoying about it."

Will grinned. "He said he eagerly awaits news that a werewolf has turned us both during the full moon."

Nico gaped at Hazel. "Is one of the monsters Asterion brought a werewolf?"

"No," she said. "And I'm trying to call them *mythics*, though old habits die hard."

“Right,” said Nico. “I guess we’ll have to rethink a lot of things.” He scanned the dining hall. “Where’s Asterion, anyway? And Frank?”

Hazel fiddled with her earlobe—one of her nervous habits. “They’re both on Temple Hill, actually. Frank needed help with some repairs on Mars’s temple, and Asterion volunteered.”

The tension in her voice was subtle, but Nico caught it. He wondered if maybe Frank and Hazel weren’t in complete agreement about the whole mythic/monster asylum issue.

“How are you holding up?” Nico asked her. “This has to be a lot for you. Youngest praetor in history, and you’ve already fought off an army, rebuilt the city, and welcomed a group of refugees from Tartarus.”

“I’m not so young, remember?” Hazel said, then squeezed his wrist. “But I’m hanging in there. Honestly, after spending a week with Asterion, his presence already seems normal to me. But I definitely felt like you did when I first spoke with him.” She picked up a drumstick, which made Nico’s mouth water. “Do you remember that I once met his mom?”

A bulb flickered on in his mind. “In the House of Hades, right?”

She nodded. “And let me tell you, Pasiphaë was a piece of work. Cruel and bitter. She saw her child as nothing more than a punishment. So when Asterion told me his story, I believed him. I felt sorry for him. And as hard as it is to say it, I also related to him. My mother said some terrible things to me when she was under Gaea’s influence.”

Her eyes went distant. “Have I made a mistake? Allowing him and his friends to stay here?”

“Of course not,” Will said. “You couldn’t have turned him away.”

She picked at her drumstick. “I’m worried that I’m biased. Or at least that’s what Frank thinks.”

There it is, Nico thought. *Trouble in paradise.*

“How so?” He tried to keep his voice even.

He liked Frank, but he didn’t like the idea of anyone or anything making Hazel’s life harder. Also, his growling stomach was making him irritable. What did a guy have to do to get a brisket sandwich around here?

“He’s afraid that I’m too close to this,” Hazel said. “That because I’ve been judged unfairly in my life, I see myself in Asterion and his group.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Will asked. “We demigods are used to being judged. We should be willing to empathize with others.”

Hazel turned up her hands. On the inside of her forearm was her legion tattoo: SPQR, then a row of lines indicating her number of years in the legion, then the symbol for Pluto, which always reminded Nico of a hand mirror.

Nico usually liked tattoos. Will had a nice sun design on his chest. But the legion tattoos had always made him uneasy. They seemed more like SKU or QR codes…a way of categorizing you, marking your value.

The voice from Nico's nightmare returned to him: *You cannot escape your nature.* He tried to push it back down into his subconscious.

"Frank's having a hard time," Hazel said at last. "I think it's partly his parentage. He's usually so easygoing, I sometimes forget his father is Mars. It makes Frank a phenomenal fighter, but it also gives him a stubborn, suspicious streak. He's having trouble believing that Asterion and the others aren't pulling some kind of trick on us. I mean, I get it! We've spent our whole lives training to fight otherworldly creatures. Now I've invited a bunch of them to live among us."

I, Nico noted. Not *we*. The decision to accept the refugees had been Hazel's alone.

"You're brilliant, Hazel," Nico assured her. "I'm sure you're doing the right thing. Will and I are going to help you."

"Absolutely," said Will. "I love a good challenge!"

At last, a wind spirit deposited a plate of food in front of Nico: brisket, bread, potato salad, and baked beans. Praise the great god Barbecuius.

Immediately, a horn sounded at the entrance of the mess hall. The legionnaires stood up and started clearing their plates. Lunch was over.

"Time for afternoon activities," Hazel said. "We should head out."

Nico stared longingly at the potato salad. He quickly put together a brisket sandwich to go before the ventus could come back and take away his plate.

"Where to?" he asked.

"To meet the other mythics." Hazel sounded even more troubled than she had when she introduced them to Asterion. "No sense putting it off any longer."

Nico munched on his sandwich as the three of them made their way toward the Field of Mars. According to Hazel, a makeshift barracks had been constructed for the refugees at the far end of the training grounds.

Despite the cloudless sky, there was a chilly breeze in the air. Nico pulled his bomber jacket tight. He wondered if Will was regretting his choice of cargo shorts. A group of demigods in purple jogging suits ran past them on the Via Praetoria while a ghostly general, floating several feet above the ground, barked orders. Nico was glad he wasn't training like that, especially right after lunch. He hoped to go the rest of his life without having to run for fitness ever again.

The Field of Mars was under construction, as always. A team of legionnaires was digging trenches and raising posts for a new fort, while Hannibal, the camp's elephant, pushed over the walls of a half-burned older building that must have been used for yesterday's mock battle. Nico didn't consider war games a fun pastime, but the Roman demigods loved them. They would build an entire castle in one day, spend the next day attacking it and burning it to the ground, and then start all over the day after that. Nico didn't get it. At least Hannibal seemed to be enjoying himself. The elephant lumbered around, pushing brick walls until they collapsed and then stomping through the rubble and trumpeting with glee. Probably very therapeutic.

Hazel led them across the north end of the field, toward a building that looked nothing like a "makeshift barracks." Nico had to remind himself that the Romans sometimes fit the stereotype he'd heard about Texans—they liked everything big. The structure they'd slapped together for their mythic guests was a towering wood-and-stucco edifice with a columned portico, large bay windows, and a red-tile roof like the ones spread across New Rome. Nico would've called it a mansion.

Out front, a young woman was applying a coat of whitewash to the columns. Nico figured she was a legionnaire—she wore a purple camp T-shirt with denim cutoffs. Then he did a double take.

Her legs were strangely mismatched. One glinted like it was sheathed in armor. The other was shaggy and bent the wrong way…like a satyr's, except it ended in a larger, un-cloven hoof. And the sunlight shone especially bright on her long red hair.

Nico stopped short. Oh, wait. Her hair was made of *fire*.

"Oh my gods," said Nico. "Is that an empousa?"

The vampire daimon must have heard him. She turned and made eye contact, her pupils glowing red.

Hazel quickly stepped between them. "Nico, Will…meet Arielle."

Nico reminded himself that these mythics were not here to hurt anyone, but Arielle's harsh scowl made it hard for him to relax. Her face was breathtakingly beautiful, haughty, and otherworldly—like those of some goddesses he'd met. White flecks of paint speckled her body

from her nose to her mismatched legs—one of which was the limb of a donkey, the other a Celestial bronze prosthesis.

She examined Nico and Will with obvious distaste. “Demigods. More of the same.”

“But they’re *not* the same,” said Hazel. “They’re from Camp Half-Blood on the other side of the country. They’re here to—”

“Greek or Roman, it doesn’t matter.” Arielle set down her paint can and brush. “You demigods are all the same. You either want to kick us out, kill us, or gawk at us like zoo animals.”

Ouch. Nico’s cheeks burned. To be fair, he *was* gawking, and he did have the urge to attack….

“We’re not interested in kicking you out,” he offered. “In fact, we’re here to help you settle in at Camp Jupiter.”

Arielle sneered. “Yeah, right. I know who you are, Nico di Angelo. You met one of my sisters—goes by the human name Kelli?”

Nico suppressed a groan. He’d run into Kelli during his first journey into the Labyrinth. She’d had sharp fangs, a garish cheerleader outfit, and a serious vendetta against Percy Jackson. As Nico recalled, Annabeth had dispatched her to Tartarus with a dagger to the chest.

He held up his hands. “Look, I’m sorry about Kelli, but—”

“You’re a real empousa…” Will interrupted, his voice full of awe. “I’d heard of your beauty, but…wow.”

Arielle gave Will a second appraisal. She flashed him a wicked smile. “Well, at least *you* seem to have some taste.”

“Nope!” Nico stepped between the two of them. “Will, no bisexual chaos allowed today! And you”—he spun on Arielle—“stop using your charmspeak on my boyfriend.”

“She’s not,” said Will. “Come on, you have to admit she’s pretty!”

Nico sputtered. “I mean…yes, but—”

“Your boyfriend is telling the truth.” Arielle glared at the ground. “I couldn’t use charmspeak on him if I wanted to. I—I don’t *have* that power. It’s why the other empousai want nothing to do with me.”

The sudden rawness in her voice made Nico feel ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She shrugged glumly. “Whatever. If Hazel believes you can help us, I guess I shouldn’t bite your head off.”

Nico wasn’t sure if she meant that literally or not.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you,” said Will, ever the diplomat, but Arielle turned her back and returned to her painting.

Nico was about to ask Hazel if all the mythics were so friendly. Then he spotted an enormous set of eyes peering out at him from the nearest bay window.

“Dam!” He stumbled back, knocking right into Will.

“That’s just Johan,” said Hazel. “Come on out, Johan! It’s safe.”

The eyes disappeared from the window. Moments later, the front door squeaked open, and a headless man stepped out.

From the waist down, Johan looked like a postal delivery guy. He wore blue polyester shorts, black tennis shoes, and bright white socks (possibly hand-knitted by the Minotaur). From the waist up, things got weird. Johan was bare-chested, except that his chest was his face. Set into his pectoral muscles was a pair of baby-blue eyes the size of tea saucers. A massive nose protruded from his sternum. His chiseled six-pack abs were split horizontally by a mouth that could have swallowed a pumpkin whole. Between his muscular shoulders, where a neck and head should have been, was a thick mass of dark hair, gelled and carefully parted on the left.

Nico had only seen a blemmyae once before—at a Cheez Whiz factory he’d accidentally shadow-traveled to with Will—but he knew enough to step back. Blemmyae were incredibly strong, tough as titanium, and they *really* didn’t like it when people trespassed in their Cheez Whiz factory.

“Are—are you sure it’s safe?” Johan asked timidly.

“Very,” Hazel assured him. “These demigods are not here to hurt you.”

“Debatable,” snapped Arielle as she ran her paintbrush up and down the nearest column.

“Hmm, I don’t like debating.” Johan took a tentative step forward. “I would rather have a nice cup of tea. You didn’t happen to bring us any honey, did you?”

Nico stared. He’d forgotten how hypnotizing it was to watch a blemmyae talk—those giant white teeth flashing between ab-muscle lips. How did they have such perfect dental hygiene and a perfect core? Did they floss and do crunches at the same time? Finally, Nico realized that Johan had been talking to him.

“H-honey?” Nico stammered.

“Yes?” Will asked.

“Yes?” Johan asked.

“No, I mean…” Nico rubbed his eyes until he saw stars. “I mean we didn’t bring any honey, sorry.”

“Oh.” Johan’s shoulders slumped, tugging down his pectoral eyebrows and giving him a sad expression. “That’s all right. I’m brewing a pot of Earl Grey if anyone would like to join me.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Will said in a small voice.

Before things could devolve into an awkward conversation about cream and sugar, Hazel interceded. “Johan, this is Nico, and this is Will. Would you bring the others outside to meet them?”

The blemmyae perked up, clearly delighted to have a job. “I’d love to! Be right back!” He turned and lumbered inside.

Hazel turned to Nico and Will. “So…what do you think so far?”

Will seemed to shake himself out of a trance. “Johan’s nice.”

Arielle snorted, painting with even more fury. Her fiery hair glowed brighter.

“I mean *everyone* seems nice,” Will corrected himself.

Hazel grimaced. Nico had only been at the Mythic Dojo Casa House a few minutes, and he was already beginning to understand why Hazel felt like she was in over her head.

“Before the others come out,” she said, “just so you’re prepared—”

Too late.

A short, stout, greenish creature tumbled out of the doorway. It was the size and shape of a human toddler, with rolls of baby fat on its arms and legs and a face that would have been adorable if not for the fangs. It wore only a purple diaper/loincloth (perhaps hand-knitted by Asterion), and leafy green wings protruded from its back. A strange cloud of brown dust swirled around it.

Nico sneezed. Then he began to cough, trying to hack up whatever had just invaded his lungs.

The toddler creature growled. “Oh, so you’re allergic to me, is that it?”

His voice was not at all like a toddler's. He sounded like a sixty-year-old man who'd spent his life smoking and eating gravel.

"Quinoa, be nice," chided Hazel.

Quinoa waddled up to Nico. The creature's hair was a densely packed field of purple-and-white flowers. His face was pockmarked with…zits? No, Nico realized. Those were seeds.

" 'Be nice,' she says," Quinoa grumbled. "Okay, fine. Hello, demigods. Are you here to reap me? Chop me into a salad?"

"You're a *karpos*!" Will said delightedly. "I didn't know quinoa even *had* grain spirits!"

Quinoa sneered. "Oh, now he rubs it in! I suppose you'll tell me I'm 'not technically a grain.' " He made sarcastic air quotes around the words. "Call me a *pseudo*-grain, like all the other karpoi do. Why you think I ran away, huh? They told me to stay with my relatives, talk to the spinach plants. You ever tried talking to a spinach plant? Don't bother! They got nothing to say!"

Nico blinked. At the moment, he felt very much like a spinach plant. "Um…"

"Quinoa," Hazel interrupted, "I told you to be nice. Will and Nico are here to help you."

"And I'm definitely not going to eat you." Nico rubbed his runny nose on the sleeve of his jacket. "Apparently, I'm allergic."

Quinoa narrowed his luminous green eyes. "Why should we trust you?"

"Because," Arielle interjected, "Hazel is asking us to." She dropped her paintbrush into her bucket, marched over to Quinoa, and picked him up, cradling him against her side like a proper baby. "Also, if they try to reap you, I will reap them first."

She definitely meant that literally. Together, they reminded Nico of a Raphael painting he'd seen once in Florence—the Madonna and child—except with more fangs, flames, and chlorophyll.

"No one is going to reap anyone," Nico promised. "Er, are there any more of you coming, or—"

As if on cue, Johan's voice drifted from inside. "No one is going to laugh at you," he was saying. "They are nice!"

Something squawked in reply…. Then Johan reemerged with a cup of tea. At his feet stood the smallest griffin in the known universe.

Nico couldn't control the grin that broke out on his face. He loved griffins, and this one was *beyond* cute. It had the sleek black body of a panther cub, salt-and-pepper wings tucked against its back, and a snow-white raptor's head with a bright yellow beak like a bald eagle's.

“Oh, wow,” said Nico.

“Yes, yes, yes.” The griffin’s childlike voice upped his cute quotient several more notches. “I am Orcus. I know I’m small. Please do not comment on my size! It makes me gaseous.”

Will made a tiny squeal of delight. He crouched down to be on Orcus’s level. “I would never criticize you,” he said. “You are *perfect*.”

“Tell that to his family,” grumbled Quinoa, still in Arielle’s arms. “They didn’t want a runt in their nest.”

Unfortunately, the comment was enough to trigger Orcus’s self-esteem farts. Nico heard nothing, but the air filled with the smell of rotten eggs. Nico buried his face in the lapel of his jacket.

“Quinoa!” Orcus screeched. “I just said don’t comment on my size!”

“Yes, that’s not polite,” Johan agreed, sipping his Earl Grey. Nico got the feeling he sipped his tea a lot while watching his comrades insult one another. “Please, continue.”

Arielle sucked in air. “You are all impossible.”

“Anyway,” Hazel said with forced cheerfulness, “that’s everyone except Semele.” She looked toward the doorway. “Semele, are you in there?”

A voice at Nico’s shoulder said, “I’m right here.”

“Gah!” He lurched back, goose bumps rippling down his arms. He looked for the source of the voice but saw no one. “Are you…invisible?” Nico asked.

“I’m an eidolon,” said the voice.

Her tone was soft and calming. Older. Like someone’s grandmother telling a bedtime story. Nevertheless, panic squeezed Nico’s chest.

“An *eidolon*?” he asked. “As in the spirits who can *possess* anyone?”

“That’s correct.” The voice sounded sad. “But fear not, son of Hades. I have no desire to possess you or anyone else anymore. In fact, that’s why I’m here. I refused to take over others against their will.”

Nico stilled. If he concentrated, he could see something there. His mind latched onto a memory: Hades with a cigar, the smoke wafting slowly upward.

Semele wasn’t totally invisible. She was a wisp of *smoke*.

Will came to Nico’s side. “Can you see her?”

Nico extended a finger toward the smoke.

“Hello, Will,” said Semele.

“Wow.” Will shivered. “I remember Annabeth telling me what it was like when the eidolons taunted her, but…”

The smoke dissipated.

“Is she gone?” Will frowned at Hazel. “Did I offend her?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Hazel said. “Semele comes and goes. Most of our guests…well, they’ve been rejected for being different.”

“Life has not been easy for us,” said Arielle, bouncing Quinoa against her side. “Our families don’t want us, and there’s nothing for us in Tartarus.”

Quinoa growled. “And I refuse to be used by horrible gods again! Gaea got most of my brothers and sisters killed!”

“Yes,” Johan said, stirring his teacup. “That was very rude.”

The little griffin Orcus farted in sympathy.

Hazel gave Nico a pained smile. “So now you’ve met everyone. What do you think?”

Will and Nico exchanged a look.

“You know I’m game,” said Will. “I think they’re all amazing!”

Nico surprised himself by nodding. The mythic refugees were terrifying, strange, and rough around the edges. They definitely didn’t seem to belong anywhere. In other words, they were Nico’s people.

He remembered his dream of being stuck on a loop in the Caldecott Tunnel, being taunted by that voice. *You cannot escape your nature.*

Maybe that had been his subconscious. Or maybe it had been something else…that sense of impending doom he’d been feeling for the last few weeks. He was only sure of one thing: this group of mythic misfits needed a home, and the world was conspiring not to let them have one.

Nico had lived that life. He totally understood why Hazel had given the mythics sanctuary.

“We’re in,” he told her. “One hundred percent. I just have to figure out one thing.”

Hazel perked up. “What’s that?”

“Where exactly do we *start*?”

That evening at dinner, Nico and Will reunited with Frank Zhang.

The praetor must've had a rough day. His jeans were ripped and muddy around the hems. His T-shirt was streaked with paint and grime, but he grinned as he lumbered toward them like a happy grizzly bear with a military buzz cut.

"Sorry I'm so filthy," he said. "I'm still going to give you a hug."

"Bring it in," said Will.

Despite Frank's size and strength, his embrace of Nico was strangely tender. His back was damp with sweat. He smelled of turpentine, but Nico didn't mind. He was thankful that he could now consider Camp Jupiter's other praetor a friend.

Their relationship had started off rocky. Like many demigods, Frank had found Nico eerie and unnerving. Nico had been wary of the clumsy, bashful giant who had an obvious crush on his sister Hazel. But the time they'd spent together aboard the *Argo II* had done wonders to change *both* of their minds. Once you earned his trust, Frank was one of the most loyal friends you could have.

Which was why Nico needed to understand Frank's concerns about the mythics. If he opposed granting them asylum, there had to be a reason. Frank wasn't the type to turn away those in need just because they were different.

As Frank settled in next to him, Nico glanced across the mess hall. Asterion and his friends had gathered around a cluster of sofas near the kitchen. The bull-man grazed from a tray piled high with salad. The griffin Orcus munched on a corncob held in his tiny front paws. Johan had gone straight for dessert—maybe because cake and cookies went best with tea. Arielle and Quinoa didn't seem to be eating at all. And Semele…well, Nico wasn't sure if Semele was with them.

Did wisps of smoke eat? Did empousai require fresh human blood? The dietary restrictions alone would be a massive challenge, and Nico realized that Hazel must be struggling with hundreds of questions like those.

Frank followed Nico's gaze. His face clouded. "They started having dinner in the mess hall a couple of nights ago. Looks like the demigods aren't bothering them at the moment. That's something."

"*Have* demigods been bothering them?" Will asked.

Frank's face reddened. He glanced at Hazel, as if worried about starting an argument. "It's complicated. There's been some…tension."

"That's one word for it," Hazel said.

Awkwardness hung in the air between the two praetors.

Nico shifted in his seat. "I saw some graffiti on the barracks."

Frank scowled. "Yeah. If I find out who did that, I'm going to go ancient Roman on them. I'll sew them into a sack with rabid animals and throw them into the river."

Nico assumed he was kidding. He *hoped* he was kidding. Then again, he remembered what Hazel had said about Frank's *son of the war god* side occasionally rising to the surface.

"We can't punish our way through this, though," Hazel said. "We need to find a way to live together."

Frank tilted his head. Nico could almost hear the question Frank was struggling not to ask out loud: *Do we, though?*

"We have an idea," Nico offered, "about how we can help."

He was about to say more, when a commotion broke out at the front of the mess hall. Multiple legionnaires leaped out of their seats. One guy with dark skin and shoulder-length locs bleached at the ends hopped up on the table and screamed, "What are *those*?"

Nico's stomach sank as his Cocoa Puffs came bounding into view.

They swarmed the First Cohort's table, sniffing at shoes and bouncing on sofas as the legionnaires backed away, terrified.

"Oh, no," said Nico, rising. "Puffs! I'm over here!"

Everyone in the mess hall turned in Nico's direction. Years ago, his greatest fear was being noticed, or seeming to be the odd one out. That didn't bother him as much anymore. Wasn't the whole world full of odd ones out? Besides, the Puffs were basically like his kids, even if Nyx had called them that in a derogatory way.

"Sorry, everyone!" he said to the diners. "They're harmless, I promise. Just, uh, try not to touch them."

For some reason, this did not seem to reassure the legionnaires.

The Puffs bounced over to him, gathering around his feet like a pack of caffeinated rats.

“Nico…” Frank’s voice was carefully controlled. “Did you bring *more* monsters to Camp Jupiter?”

Nico scowled. “We’re not calling them *monsters*, remember?”

Frank looked like he was counting to five, trying to regain his composure. “Right,” he said at last. “So…what did you call them, *pugs*?”

“Puffs,” corrected Will. “Short for Cocoa Puffs. Which is a nickname for cacodemons.”

“Cacodemons,” Frank said. “As in evil spirits.”

“Frank, please,” Hazel said. “I know you’ve been on edge lately, but—”

“No, it’s fine.” He kept his eyes fixed on Nico. “I’m sorry. I was surprised, is all.”

Nico could sense that things definitely were *not* fine, but Frank was trying.

“My bad,” Nico said. “I keep forgetting to tell people that I have a little battalion of dark emotions following me around.”

Nico briefly explained what Nyx had done to him months earlier when they went to Tartarus to rescue Bob. He did his best to name each of the cacodemons for Frank, but before he could finish, half of them split off and started wandering the mess hall. Defiance scuttled over to the Second Cohort table and began to yap, demanding table scraps. Loneliness rolled onto the top of a girl’s sneaker and decided to take a nap there, while the girl stared down at it in horror.

“Uh, you’ll have to excuse them,” Nico said. “I’m learning that each has a mind of its own. Even though they were created from my memories and feelings, they’re independent living beings.”

“And if you touch them?” asked Frank.

Hazel cleared her throat. “They make you feel whatever emotion they represent.”

“They don’t do it maliciously,” Will added. “We think that’s how they try to communicate. It’s actually kind of exciting.”

“Exciting,” Frank repeated.

“I like them,” rumbled a deep voice.

Nico looked to his right—and up and *up*—to find Asterion standing over him. How a seven-foot-tall Minotaur had managed to sneak up on them, Nico wasn’t sure, especially since Asterion was wearing the loudest cable-knit hooded cardigan that had ever been created—a fever dream of turquoise, yellow, and chartreuse wool. The cacodemon Sadness had fallen asleep in the crook of the bull-man’s arm.

“This one is my favorite,” said Asterion. Tears streaked the fur of his left cheek. “Though holding it fills me with a terrible longing.”

“It does that sometimes,” Nico said.

“Join us?” Will asked the bull-man.

Hazel and Frank exchanged an uncomfortable look, perhaps worrying about the optics of Asterion sitting at the officers’ table, but Asterion bowed his head in gratitude. “Thank you, yes.”

The bench groaned under Asterion’s weight.

“Praetor Zhang,” he began, “I enjoyed our time together today, remodeling the Temple of Mars.”

Frank nodded. “Yes, me, too. Thanks for all your help. And you can just call me Frank.”

“The temple looks much better now,” Asterion continued. “I hope you will consider my offer to make a hand-knitted cloth for the altar.”

Frank studied the bull-man’s cardigan. “I’m sure that would be…colorful.”

“And in that spirit of cooperation,” said Asterion, “I have another proposal to make. I believe there are many ways we mythics can contribute to Camp Jupiter, but these can only be discovered by working side by side. I propose that tomorrow the mythics begin training with your demigods.”

Frank picked at a spot of dirt on his purple jersey. Nico had the feeling that the praetor was suppressing the urge to scream into his shirt. “Training. With the demigods?”

“Is that such an offensive idea, son of Mars?”

“No,” said Frank quickly. “I just think we have to be very careful about what we’re doing here.”

Asterion made a rumbling noise deep in his throat—like a *mm-hmm* of assent, though it came out more like *hmm-moo*. “We agree on that, Praetor Zhang. I am not trying to rush this process.” He paused. “If I may be honest…we are nervous. We have never done anything like this. On the other hand, we can only learn how to benefit one another if we work together. Like today, and the altar cloth.”

“Right,” Frank said. “Like the altar cloth.”

Hazel put her hand on Frank’s. “We’ll discuss your generous offer, Asterion,” she said. “As it happens, Nico and Will were just about to tell us *their* idea about how they can help.”

“Oh, yes?” said another voice, right next to Nico.

The hairs rose on the back of his neck. Nico nearly bolted upright. Then he realized it was just Semele.

“I’m sorry, Nico di Angelo,” said the eidolon. “I did not mean to startle you. I have not yet figured out how to announce my presence in a way that doesn’t terrify you mortals.”

“It’s fine,” said Nico, forcing himself to relax his shoulders. “Um…so anyway, we were thinking….”

He gave Will a *Help me out* look.

“We’d like to train with the legion for a few days,” Will said. “Get to know everyone, learn your routines. You know, see for ourselves what’s been going on.”

Frank set down his fork and peered at Will skeptically. “Are you sure you’re ready for life at Camp Jupiter?”

“Of course,” Will said. “I’m a counselor at Camp Half-Blood, you know.”

Hazel chuckled to herself. “As if that’s anything like legion training.”

“Oh, come on,” Will said. “It can’t be that bad! Right, Nico?”

Nico examined a cobweb on the ceiling. “What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“Not you, too,” Will said, feigning defeat. “Look, it’s like Asterion said. The best way we can help is to work side by side with you. Build some trust. Maybe we can be an example of how demigods and mythics can coexist.”

Frank nodded. “That’s all fine. I’m just afraid if you’re not used to military discipline, you’re not going to last long.”

Will rolled his eyes. “We’ll fit right in. And I promise I won’t complain about Camp Jupiter at all.”

“I’m not even going to shake on it,” said Frank. “That’s how certain I am that you’re gonna regret that statement.”

“It’s an admirable idea,” Hazel said to Will. “How about this? You two can bunk in the guest barracks. In the morning, you can train with the Fifth Cohort. We’ll see how it goes. How does that sound, Frank?”

Her question sounded pointed, like *Work with me here.*

“Sure,” Frank said. “Then, if Will and Nico are still up for it, in the afternoon they can do some training with the mythics, like Asterion suggested.”

His tone made it clear he doubted Nico and Will would last until the afternoon.

“Excellent!” Asterion stood, setting Sadness on the dinner table. “Thank you, Praetors. And now we should return to our own quarters before sunset. I have noted that we tend to make your legionnaires more nervous after dark. Come, Semele!”

Nico couldn’t tell whether Semele followed Asterion, but the other mythics rose and filed out of the mess hall, their progress followed by the eyes of half the legion.

As soon as they were gone, it was as if a mourning veil had been lifted from the place. The campers’ conversations increased in volume, became livelier. For the first time that evening, Nico heard laughter.

“Wow,” he said. “Will, did you notice that?”

“I did. Everyone’s relaxed now. Is it always like that?” he asked Hazel.

She sagged. “Always. Once Asterion or any of his friends enter a room, it’s like all the air disappears in an instant.”

“No one can relax around them,” agreed Frank.

“I understand why this is so hard,” Hazel said. “It’s where Frank and I are in total agreement.”

Frank squeezed her hand. “How do you change hundreds of years of teaching and tradition? We’ve literally taught some of these kids how to kill an empousa on sight.”

“Which is what Savannah tried to do,” said Hazel, “the first time she saw Arielle.”

Frank grimaced at the memory. “And her reaction was exactly what we’d want of her, right? As demigods, we’re protecting the world from nightmarish threats. But now those very threats are here, and they’re…they’re eating all the best cookies!”

Hazel rested her chin in the palm of her hand. “It’s hard for the mythics, too. They’re used to the chaos of Tartarus. Now they’re trying to live with a bunch of suspicious demigods they’ve been taught to hunt and kill.”

At the mention of Tartarus, where all “monsters” went to regenerate after their deaths on Earth, Nico frowned. He could feel his instincts kicking in, reminding him of what he and Will had gone through so recently.

Even Will’s good humor seemed to have dampened. “Your concerns…they make sense.”

“I don’t know how to serve both groups.” Hazel gave her food a desultory stab with her fork. “To protect the legion while asking them to reconsider what they’ve been taught. To offer Asterion’s

group sanctuary but also ask them to adjust to an entirely new life. Ugh! This makes me feel like I'm going to explode."

"Well, you're not doing it alone," said Frank. "I'm here. And as hard as this is, we're going to figure it out. Especially now that we've got these two helping us." He punched Nico's arm playfully.

Hazel managed a laugh. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

Nico felt better, seeing that everything between Hazel and Frank wasn't stress and tension. "We'll figure this out," he agreed. "Starting tomorrow."

Frank grinned. "I still think you're gonna fold like laundry, Will."

"You wish," Will said. "I survived Tartarus. Camp Jupiter will be *cake*."

Nico gave him an encouraging smile, but he remembered his first visit to Camp Jupiter. It was *very* different from Camp Half-Blood.

No point telling Will this, though. Maybe he would do better than Nico feared. If not, at least Nico would be amused when Will realized how wrong he was.

CHAPTER 7

"Wake up, Romans! Rise and shine!"

The voice echoed throughout the barracks. Nico's eyes flitted open in the darkness a second before the lights blazed on. He got a hazy glimpse of a girl with pink hair looming over him, along with a whiff of her strawberry bubble gum. Then he buried his face under his pillow as Will groaned in the next bunk over.

"Up, up, up!" the girl shouted. "You gotta be prepared to *be* prepared! A threat could arise at any time!"

"Aren't *you* the threat right now?" asked Will.

"You better believe it!" said the girl. "Now get out of those bunks, unless you want to spend the next six hours tap-dancing!"

Tap-dancing? Nico must have misheard her.

He threw the pillow aside, sat up, and rubbed his eyes. On the opposite bunk, Will did the same. His hair looked like the wind spirits from the mess hall had played hopscotch in it.

Between them stood the pink-haired girl, wearing a strange combination of armor, blue jeans, and pink buckle-strap dance shoes. Her limbs seemed too long for her body, like she'd been stretched on a rack and just stayed that way. Her big eyes gave her a look of permanent surprise. She didn't seem particularly threatening, but pinned to her breastplate was the insignia of a Roman centurion.

Nico groaned inwardly. "You're the leader of the Fifth Cohort."

She treated them to a tap-dancing riff that sounded like the chorus to "Look What You Made Me Do."

"Lavinia Asimov at your service," she said. "Except you're at *my* service today, pumpkin!"

She tap-skipped over to Will's bunk. "And you, Blondie—you're a son of Apollo, aren't you? You should have no problem rising at dawn."

"I'm in the wrong time zone for that," Will muttered.

“Well, you’re on Lavinia Time now.” She popped her chewing gum. “If you’re not dressed in full gear and outside for your morning run in five minutes, you’re going to be tap-dancing to ‘I Got Rhythm’ until you’re ready to perform it for the whole legion!”

She danced herself right out of the barracks.

Will frowned. “Did I just hallucinate that?”

Nico shook his head. “I don’t think she was kidding about ‘I Got Rhythm.’ ”

“It’s okay. We can handle a morning run.” Will yawned. “A little physical activity never hurt anyone.”

Nico admired his optimism. Personally, he considered mandatory physical activity almost as intolerable as his own PTSD, but he swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

During the night, a set of armor and fresh clothes had appeared at the foot of his bunk. He frowned as Will gathered up his own supplies and padded into the restroom, whistling “Look What You Made Me Do.”

Nico got dressed. He scowled at the armor, which he really didn’t want to run in, but when Lavinia said *full gear*, he was sure she meant *full gear*. He tried to dress quietly so as not to wake the Puffs, who had somehow managed to sleep through Lavinia’s tap dancing and were still nestled in the blankets on the bunk above Nico’s. If Nico couldn’t sleep in, at least his demons could.

As he strapped on his cuirass, he thought about the conversations he’d had yesterday. He now understood the challenges Hazel and Frank were facing, even if he wasn’t sure how to help them. No matter what kind of reputation Nico and Will might have had, they couldn’t just make a speech before the senate and the legion and say *Be nicer to the Minotaur and his friends!* They couldn’t force the two groups to get along. That was going to require time, patience, and hard work. The best Nico could hope for was to set a good example, but he wasn’t sure he was the best model for getting along with others.

The mythics’ dilemma had also dredged up memories from his trip with Will into Tartarus. In the Underworld, Will had been a lot like the mythics were here in Camp Jupiter—out of his element, uncomfortable, and scared. He had struggled to accept the fact that Tartarus was more complicated than he’d thought it was.

But Will had listened. He’d *changed*, and so had Nico. Now he couldn’t imagine life without the Cocoa Puffs. He would move mountains and stars for Bob the Titan. Incredibly, he even had a few fond memories of Tartarus. Some of the best people he knew were “monsters.”

Nico's mind latched onto the word *people*. Had he ever referred to living beings who weren't human as people before? Maybe…But could the Roman demigods ever come to accept the idea that Asterion and his friends were more than enemies to fear? That they were people just like them? He hoped so. But first, Nico would have to prove he could do a morning run without falling on his face.

Suddenly, Will was standing before him in full armor, his shoes laced up. "Ready, my grumpy ball of darkness?"

"I guess," he said. "How are you still so cheerful?"

Will flashed a bright smile and then caressed Nico's cheek. "I'm with my favorite person! Let's find our tap dance instructor."

Outside, the sky was still dark—just a touch of gray light silhouetting the eastern horizon. As far as Nico could tell, none of the other cohorts were stirring, but the Fifth had all turned out, bleary-eyed and bedheaded. There were about forty demigods in the cohort—not a lot compared to an ancient Roman cohort, but a healthy number for modern times, especially considering the casualties the legion had suffered in its recent battles against the Titans, giants, and evil emperors. Hazel was right: clearly, the legion had replenished its numbers rapidly in the last few months.

Nico only recognized a few faces. One of the lieutenants in front was a brown-haired kid named Thomas something-or-other. Floating behind the ranks, in glowing purple armor, was one of the cohort's companion ghosts, Vitellius Reticulus (nicknamed Vitellius the Ridiculous), who had yelled at Nico many times in the past. Other than that…all new. Members of the Fifth Cohort had a habit of either getting promoted or dying.

Lavinia grinned as Nico and Will walked up. Her shoes had changed from tap flats to sneakers, but they were still bright pink. "Good, the sleepyheads decided to join us!"

The other legionnaires eyed Will and Nico suspiciously. Maybe, like Will, they were wondering whether they were hallucinating.

"All right, Fifth Cohort!" Lavinia swept her hand toward the south. "To Temple Hill and back! Move!"

The cohort broke ranks and stampeded down the Via Praetoria.

Will winked at Nico. "Race you there!" He sprinted after the legionnaires, moving remarkably well in his heavy armor.

Lavinia squinted at Nico. "You waiting for a special invitation, pumpkin? Your boyfriend has a sizable lead. You'd better get going unless you really love dancing to George and Ira Gershwin!"

Nico bit back a retort. He could've told Lavinia that he'd been alive when the Gershwins wrote their best, but he didn't want to sound like Old Man di Angelo. He jogged after the crowd, huffing and puffing as Lavinia sang "I Got Rhythm" somewhere behind him in the darkness.

He'd just reached the gates of the fort when a thought occurred to him: *The darkness.* Oh, right. Darkness was kind of his thing.

He ducked into the alley behind the First Cohort's barracks.

He took a deep breath, imagining the Romans' shrine to his father, aka Pluto. It had been a while since he'd visited it, but he could still picture the small building clearly. He stepped into the shadows, felt a brief rush of cold, and emerged about a mile to the south, on a crushed-stone path halfway up the slopes of Temple Hill. Before him stood Pluto's shrine: a mausoleum partially sunk into the hillside, its roof encrusted with bones and precious jewels.

Nico had an excellent view across the valley—the glittering lights of New Rome, a few sails on the dark waters of the lake, the watch fires lining the legion's fort—but the Fifth Cohort was nowhere to be seen. They were probably still lugging their armored butts along the unlit Via Praetoria.

Nico wobbled, briefly woozy. He sat with his back against one of the long columns that framed the shrine's entrance and waited for Will's arrival.

He dozed off….

He dreamed of a voice coming from the mausoleum, whispering from the depths of the Underworld. *Go home, Nico di Angelo!* the voice hissed, cold and angry. *Keep aiding and abetting criminals, and we'll find you guilty as well! Faster! Faster!*

He jolted awake, what felt like only seconds later. The sky was turning pink. Somewhere nearby, boots crunched against gravel, and a voice was shouting, "Faster! Faster!"

The first of the Roman demigods appeared, lumbering up the hill. Will was in the lead, still grinning, his blond hair catching the first rays of the sun. The shouting was coming from Vitellius Reticulus, who floated behind the legionnaires, urging them on.

"You call this running?" the Lar bellowed. "Why, back in my day, we raced each other across the Alps barefoot without stopping for water, and we liked it!"

"Vitellius," wheezed one of the demigods, "that never happened."

"Don't tell me how to Roman, soldier!" yelled the ghost. "Faster!"

Nico got to his feet, trying to shake off his dream. It took all his willpower not to turn and stare at the iron doors of the shrine, wondering who might have been speaking from inside.

The Fifth Cohort runners stumbled to a halt when they saw Nico. They looked stunned, sweaty, and extremely irritated. Will stared at him in disbelief.

"Where have you been?" Nico asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "I've been waiting forever."

Will bent over, his hands on his knees. When he straightened again, he was laughing. "You *didn't*. You little cheater!"

Vitellius drifted over, glowering at Nico. "What is this about, son of Pluto? Why does the blond one call you a cheater?"

Nico smirked. "I wouldn't call it cheating. I'd call it using my demigod powers to gain an advantage."

Vitellius examined him up and down. "You shadow-traveled, eh? What are you, a Carthaginian? That's dishonorable!"

The ghost fumed for a moment, like he was debating smacking Nico upside the head with the flat of his spectral gladius.

"Hmph, I'll allow it," Vitellius finally decided. "But *not* on the way back down!"

He wheeled on the Fifth Cohort. More runners were starting to arrive, some gasping, others guzzling from their canteens.

"What are you all resting for?" Vitellius demanded. "Drinking and breathing are for the weak! About-face! Double-time march! Back to camp with you all!"

The Romans groaned and complained, but they turned and staggered back down the hill, Vitellius hounding them all the way.

Will hung back. He laid a hand on Nico's shoulder. "Please don't tell Frank I ever said this, and I will deny it under oath, but I'm kind of hating this whole military-discipline thing."

Nico cracked a smile. Every time Will was able to admit to hating something, it felt like a small victory.

"Well, let's get out of here," he suggested.

Will looked scandalized. "You don't mean—"

Nico grabbed his hand. "Will you join me in the darkness?"

Will rolled his eyes. "You're so cheesy." Then he grinned. "But yes. Maybe Bombilo's coffee shop is open. I could go for a chai latte and a blueberry muffin."

"Now that's the kind of military discipline I like," Nico agreed.

He glanced back at the doors of the shrine. He tried to put his brief dream behind him, but that voice from the Underworld had sounded vaguely familiar. *Guilty. Aiding and abetting.* The words meshed a little too well with what Will had said about denying something under oath….

“What’s wrong?” Will asked.

“Probably nothing.” Nico concentrated on Will’s beautiful eyes, the way his hair caught the sunlight. “Next stop, Bombilo’s.”

He stepped with Will into the shadow of Pluto’s shrine.

CHAPTER 8

The rest of their morning training wasn't so easy to escape.

When Lavinia found out about their shadow-travel cheat, she laughed and complimented them for being so sneaky. Then she sentenced them to being the "first couple" for two hours of square-dance practice in the hot sun. By then, it had become clear to Nico that Lavinia Asimov was a daughter of Terpsichore, the Muse of Dance, and she considered dancing a critical part of team building and combat training.

"Half sashay!" she yelled into a megaphone, which was completely unnecessary since she was standing right behind them. "Promenade! Look lively, Romans! A threat could arrive at any time! You've gotta be prepared to square-dance at a moment's notice!"

"Is it possible to love someone's vibe," Will whispered to Nico as they do-si-doed, "and still find them completely annoying?"

"I heard that!" Lavinia blasted the megaphone in their ears. "And I love you too! Now swing your partner, Blondie!"

Next, they did an hour of weight training. Then, when Nico's arms felt like overcooked noodles, Lavinia took the Fifth Cohort to the archery range.

"You can use a regular bow," she advised her legionnaires, "but all the real girlies use one of these!"

She brandished her weapon of choice—a heavy-duty two-handed crossbow called a manubalista.

"Nice," Nico said. "Was the armory out of rocket launchers?"

Lavinia grinned. "Funny! You're first up, pumpkin!"

Nico proved unable to hold the weapon upright, much less fire it, which delighted Lavinia. "Come on!" she chided him. "My girlfriend is stronger than that, and she's a poison ivy plant!"

Will used a very normal bow and was able to land all his arrows on the target. None were bull's-eyes, but he was clearly overjoyed to have made such an improvement.

Finally horns blew from the sentry towers, signaling lunchtime. Will and Nico trudged miserably to the mess hall, then realized they were already late for their afternoon meeting with Asterion.

They grabbed sandwiches to go and trudged right back out across the Field of Mars. Nico hoped the Puffs were still asleep in the guest quarters. At least *they* could relax.

Asterion was waiting for them on the porch of the makeshift mansion. Somehow, he'd found himself an extra-large rocking chair, and was rocking back and forth, knitting what looked like a new sweater. Arielle sat next to him, sipping an iced red beverage that Nico fervently hoped was just Kool-Aid.

Nico found the scene strangely wholesome and domestic—Ma and Pa Mythic at home on the farm.

"Welcome!" the bull-man said in his deep voice. "I am glad you are here."

"You're late," Arielle noted. "Can we get this 'joint training' nonsense over with? There is more to be done on our…*home*."

She said the last word like it was from a language she didn't speak. Nico remembered when he couldn't imagine Camp Half-Blood as a place where he'd ever belong. He wondered if this was how all of Asterion's friends were feeling.

The bull-man rose from his chair. He held up his new sweater for them to see. It had broad pink and white stripes, with a slogan stitched across the chest in large red letters: I LUV DEMIGODS.

"What do you think?" He directed the question at Arielle. "I thought it might make you seem friendlier to our hosts."

The empousa glanced at Will. If she'd been able to charmspeak, Nico imagined she would have told him *Please kill me now.*

"There's no way I am wearing that," she said.

"I think it's lovely," Will offered.

"Hmm-moo." Asterion's massive shoulders slumped. "Perhaps pink is not Arielle's color. No matter. Please, demigods, come inside."

They were just crossing the threshold when Nico heard someone running up the front steps behind them. He turned and found Hazel, out of breath, dressed casually in boots, jeans, and an SPQR T-shirt. Her mass of curly brown hair was pulled back and tied off with a purple scrunchie.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "We had to deal with a couple of campers who…" She glanced at the mythics. "Never mind."

Nico didn't ask, but he felt a lump of anger hardening in his chest. Why did people have to behave badly?

They walked inside together, and Nico's grumpiness dissipated as he scanned the room.

"Oh my gods," he said.

"Right?" Will said. "This place is…wow."

The mansion's great room was an open-floor-plan loft. Up in the exposed beams of the ceiling, Orcus had built a nest woven of straw and gold necklaces, no doubt because griffins loved shiny things. In the far-right corner was a hydroponic garden—a wide bed of planter boxes laced with irrigation tubing under panels of purple LED lights. The karpos Quinoa sprawled between two rows of seedlings with a dark visor over his eyes like he was having a tanning session.

In the opposite corner, the blemmyae Johan had set up a sort of tearoom salon. The sideboard overflowed with tiered pastry stands and teapots on lace doilies. Two plush velvet armchairs flanked a coffee table piled high with books. Johan himself was tinkering with some sort of contraption Nico didn't understand—it was like a clothes rack with a giant magnifying glass attached to one end and a music stand attached to the other. Johan's lair gave off a strong Sherlock Holmes vibe, if Sherlock Holmes had no head and a face in the middle of his chest.

Nico didn't see any areas marked off for Asterion, Arielle, or Semele, but several doorways led to other rooms. Maybe they each had their own private space. As usual, Nico wasn't even sure Semele was present. He looked for telltale signs of smoke but saw nothing.

The most eye-catching part of the great room was the conversation pit. A sunken square of dark green sofas framed a twenty-by-twenty-foot section of pink shag carpeting, except…

Nico's stomach twisted. That wasn't shag carpeting. The pink surface was stippled with tufts of black hair, large white pustules, and streaks of red bumps that could only be described as a rash.

The carpet was a very particular kind of skin. And unfortunately, Nico recognized it.

Will must've had the same realization. He exhaled like he'd been punched in the gut. "That's what the ground looks like in Tartarus."

Asterion smiled, obviously pleased. "Indeed, Will Solace. We cut it out ourselves, rolled it up, and brought it with us. I was not sure it would survive the journey."

Orcus flew down from his nest and landed at Hazel's side. "We're *still* not sure it will survive. But we had to try."

Nico fought down a sense of panic. He tried to keep his tone neutral. "You brought it…why?"

"Ha!" Quinoa barked from his hydroponic tanning bed. "My friends here ain't plant-based life, kid. We can't just stick 'em in the soil and water 'em if they get injured. What happens if one of your demigods gets worked up and wounds one of them? Or, gods forbid, kills one?"

Will's eyes widened. "That's…ingenious, actually. You're trying to grow a regeneration bed so you don't have to return to Tartarus if the worst happens."

Nico looked at Hazel. "You knew about this?"

She nodded, her expression grim. "We're not advertising this to the legion, though."

Nico could see why. The idea of growing a mini Tartarus in the middle of Camp Jupiter terrified him. If the legionnaires knew, they'd have a lot more to worry about than just graffiti and occasional scuffles.

Arielle stepped into the pit. She lounged across one of the sofas like she was posing for a photo shoot. "You wouldn't begrudge us a memento from our homeland, would you?"

Will clutched his stomach. "I feel queasy."

"RAWK!" Orcus ruffled his feathers. "I will never understand the weakness of human stomachs. I could eat all day without feeling the need to regurgitate!"

"Not helping," Will muttered.

"Perhaps we should begin," said Asterion. "Hazel Levesque, I understand you have arranged for a group of demigods to meet us on the Field of Mars?"

Hazel dragged her gaze from the shag Tartarus carpet. "I…Yes. The Second Cohort has agreed to train with you."

"Excellent!" Asterion beamed at his comrades, who didn't look nearly as enthusiastic. "But before we go, we have been discussing ways we might contribute to Camp Jupiter during our time here."

"Oh?" Hazel asked.

Johan stepped forward, twiddling his thumbs. "I'm very good at lots of things! In particular, I love reading and history, libraries, and archives. Although I do require corrective lenses." He gestured back at the contraption in his tea salon.

It dawned on Nico that blemmyae must have terrible depth perception, given that their huge eyes were set into their chests. That magnifying glass on the rack was a clever long-distance reading device.

Johan's challenges certainly hadn't dampened his enthusiasm. He looked at Hazel eagerly. "Are we going to have a document-filing competition on the Field of Mars? If so, I will win!"

"Hmm," said Hazel. "Probably not. But the legion archives in the principia *are* a mess. We have centuries of records and boxes of artifacts—"

“Excellent!” Johan said. “I would love to organize your archives if you will allow me. I don’t think you could find a better fit for the job.”

Arielle clicked her tongue. “Don’t pat yourself on the back too hard,” she grumbled.

Johan frowned. “I cannot reach my back with my arms. I am not anatomically designed for that.”

“Arielle,” chided Asterion, “I do not see why you need to be so antagonistic.”

“And I don’t see why you need to bend and shape yourself to others’ whims.”

“No one is bending or shaping,” said the bull-man. “No one is forcing you to do anything.”

“Oh, no?” the empousa growled.

Will tried to intervene. “Arielle, what do *you* want to do?”

“I want to be left alone,” she said matter-of-factly. Then she sized up Will in his Roman armor. “Although I suppose *you* could stay.”

Nico fought down his irritation. “Then what’s keeping you here?” he asked. “You can go anywhere, can’t you?”

“Of course we can’t,” she snapped. “They’d eventually find us and—” She stopped herself.

“And what?” Nico pressed. “Who is *they*?”

Arielle shook her head in disgust. The mythics looked glum. Maybe she’d been talking in general about the gods and other immortals who summoned creatures from Tartarus to do their bidding, but Nico got the sense she’d had a more specific *they* in mind.

“The important thing,” Asterion said, “is that here we are safe. We have a chance to build something new.”

“But *are* we safe?” Arielle demanded. “How long will it be until demigods attack us? Weeks? Days?”

“No one is attacking anyone!” Hazel said desperately.

Will and Nico exchanged a concerned look of agreement. *This is already way more complicated than we expected.*

“Okay,” said Will. “Just for the sake of discussion, what *would* you like to do if you stayed at Camp Jupiter? Other supernatural beings have made it work. The Lares. The wind spirits in the mess hall—”

“You want me to *serve food* to mortals?” Arielle’s eyes flashed like lightning. “That’s your idea?”

Will held his hands up. “No. I just thought—”

“We empousai were forced to serve Kronos, you know,” she continued. “And after that, Gaea. We weren’t given much of a choice in their terrible wars. Either we fought for them and caused untold devastation, or we would be snuffed out. I have no interest in serving anyone. Not a Titan or a god, and certainly not a mortal. I don’t want to be forced to do anything ever again!”

“You won’t be,” said Hazel.

“How can I trust you?”

“Because Gaea manipulated *me*, too!”

The group fell silent. The pain in Hazel’s voice made Nico’s heart ache.

The anger in Arielle’s eyes dimmed. “I did not know.”

“I don’t talk about it much,” said Hazel. “I lost my mother *and* my life because of Gaea. If it wasn’t for Nico here, I’d still be wandering the Fields of Asphodel.”

Orcus lifted his beak, sniffing the air around Hazel. “You *died*? You smell very alive to me.”

“She is,” said Nico. “I found her down there and brought her back, gave her another chance at life. That’s what you all are looking for too, right?”

The mythics were silent, apparently pondering that idea.

Arielle’s expression softened. “I’m not promising anything, but I suppose I could help with combat training….” She talked like she was dipping a toe into a pool.

“She is fierce against her opponents,” confirmed Asterion.

Arielle kept her eyes still fixed on Hazel. “Also…I apologize for my hurtful comments, Praetor Levesque.”

“Thank you,” Hazel said. “And no pressure, but if you ever want to talk, I’m here.”

Arielle looked stunned, like she wasn’t sure how to process that offer. “I— Yes. That would be appreciated.”

Nico squeezed his sister’s hand, prouder than ever to be related to Hazel.

“Well,” he said, trying to keep the conversation moving, “what about anyone else? Any skills or powers that you feel like sharing?”

Quinoa hopped off his hydroponic bed, his leafy wings fluttering. He hiked up his burlap diaper and waddled over.

“Obviously, I’m a terror on the battlefield too,” he said in his gravelly voice. “But really, I wanna work with kids.”

“What?” cried Orcus, horrified. “Why would anyone want to work with children?”

Quinoa bared his fangs at the griffin, demonstrating just how cute and cuddly he would be with little ones. “You joking? Kids love me. We see eye to eye.”

Nico couldn’t argue with that. In fact, the grain spirit would’ve had to look up to most toddlers.

Will’s mouth twisted in confusion. “That’s— I mean…would you teach or—?”

“ ’Course!” Quinoa said. “I don’t want to criticize, but you mortals are absolute *fertilizer* when it comes to gardening. Adults just don’t wanna hear it. You gotta start with the younger generation, teach ’em to respect the earth and whatnot. That’s why you guys call it nursery school and kinder-garden, right?”

Nico was pretty sure that’s not why *kindergarten* was called kindergarten, but he also didn’t want to get punched in the face by a pseudo-grain.

“Sounds great.” He looked at Hazel for support.

“Um, yes,” she said half-heartedly. “We do have primary school for the families in New Rome. I could ask.”

“RAWK!” Orcus let loose a nervous fart. “If that makes you happy, Quinoa. Me, I never want to be reminded of the young. Not wanting to have children is why I got exiled in the first place!”

“Wait, is that a bad thing among griffins?” Will asked.

“It is sacrilegious!” Orcus said, his voice rising in pitch. “We griffins are expected to have as many hatchlings as possible to further our bloodline.” He shook his head and made a gagging sound. “The idea makes me *sick*! Sentencing others to this…this small, flatulent existence? I would rather do anything else than have children.”

“Oh, Orcus…” Asterion said in his deep, comforting voice, but the griffin’s next fart made it clear he did not want to be consoled on this subject.

“Well…” Hazel said into the awkward silence, “maybe you could help with camp surveillance. You’re pretty great at flying, right?”

Orcus immediately perked up. “Flying? I *love* flying!”

And with that, the griffin launched into the air. He looped around the rafters, dive-bombed Arielle, who shrieked in outrage, and then made a surprisingly delicate landing on Hazel’s shoulder, where he perched like a black-and-white cat parrot.

Nico offered him a wide smile. “You’re *fast*!”

Orcus preened. “I’m the fastest, boy!”

“Surveillance it is!” Hazel said excitedly. “I think you’d be a wonderful addition to the team.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Orcus.

Asterion smiled. “This conversation has been an excellent start. Now, Hazel, what will be the nature of our training with the Second Cohort?”

“Filing documents?” Johan said hopefully.

“Gardening?” asked Quinoa.

“Surveillance?” asked Orcus.

“Uh, well, just basic hand-to-hand combat today,” Hazel said. “You know, hitting each other with wooden swords and poles.”

“May I hit small children with these poles?” Quinoa asked. “They can hit me back.”

“No…no,” Hazel said, “just legionnaires.”

“Hmm.” Quinoa glowered. “Very well.”

Hazel’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Great. And I agree with Asterion. I think this is a good start!”

Asterion and his friends headed excitedly out the front door, except for Arielle, who trailed behind, literally dragging her bronze foot. As for Semele, Nico still had no idea if she was absent or observing quietly, but he supposed she could join in later….

They had to begin *somewhere*. So why not with a little light hand-to-hand combat training? Nico and Will would be there to supervise. What could possibly go wrong?

He would later ask Johan to file that in the archives under *Famous Last Words.*

CHAPTER 9

At first, the training session *wasn't* a disaster.

Hazel handed the reins over to Frank, who usually oversaw training with all the newest legionnaires—or *probationes*, as they were called in Latin.

"I've got to go deal with some boneheads from the Third Cohort," Hazel explained.

Nico frowned. "More protests against the mythics?"

"Not this time." She whistled, and her steed Arion came zipping in from across the Field of Mars at warp six. "They were playing pranks on citizens in New Rome—disguising themselves as bushes in the Forum and jumping out as people walked past them."

Will stifled a laugh. "That's actually pretty funny."

"Hmm." Hazel scowled. "Okay, yes, but discipline, training, et cetera. You're in good hands with Frank. You boys have fun!"

Nico heard the relief in her voice. She leaped onto her stallion and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Meanwhile, Frank paced back and forth, lining up demigods and mythics to spar with each other using wooden training swords called *rudes*. The whole Second Cohort wasn't present—just ten of the newest recruits—but Nico was still amazed how many demigods had joined the legion in the past few months. Among them were Yazan and Savannah—the two sentries they'd met at the Caldecott Tunnel.

Frank had paired off Savannah with Arielle, which was either a great idea to build trust, or a terrible idea given what the praetors had said about Savannah trying to kill the empousa when they first met.

Asterion faced a team of three probatii, which Frank said might even the odds. Quinoa struggled to hold a rudis as tall as him. Orcus, who couldn't hold a sword at all, just flapped his wings, squawked, and farted, daring his sparring partner to try to land a hit. Johan leaned casually against his wooden blade, trying to engage his two opponents in a conversation about Darjeeling tea. The two remaining legionnaires were paired up—Yazan and a kid named Deion.

Nico and Will stood on the far end of the group, observing.

“Parati!” Frank bellowed. “Impellite!”

Nico knew enough Latin to understand those commands: *Ready! Strike!*

Apparently, most of the trainees did not.

“Parrots?” Orcus cried in alarm. “Where?”

His opponent whacked him across the beak, eliciting a fart of outrage. “Ow!” the griffin complained. “What was *that* for?”

Quinoa lunged forward, screaming “Fear me, grain-eater!” He slapped his blade lightly against the probatio’s shin. The probatio frowned and swung his rudis like a golf club, knocking Quinoa on his diapered butt.

Johan kept explaining the merits of loose-leaf tea as his two opponents charged in. The blemmyae sidestepped their attacks with remarkable ease, causing the demigods to crash into each other.

“Oh, dear,” Johan said. “I’m so sorry. Now, if you’re using *organic* Darjeeling…”

Asterion’s three opponents attacked in unison, but all three of their wooden blades shattered against the bull-man’s midriff. Rather than counterattacking, Asterion started picking splinters out of his kilt, looking for snags in the stitchwork.

Savannah lunged in, ferociously stabbing at Arielle’s face, but the empousa parried lazily, countering with a harsh smack across Savannah’s thigh. The probatio fell to one knee.

Will murmured to Nico, “Were we this bad when we started?”

“When did you get so *mean*?” Nico whispered back.

“I remember now. You *were* this bad. That’s how you got hurt that first time we met.”

“You’re going to hold on to that memory forever, aren’t you?”

Will grinned. “Like it happened yesterday.”

Thwack!

Yazan lowered his sword. “Deion, I’m sorry!”

His partner—the tall Black demigod with locs that were bleached on the ends—rubbed his right arm. His sword lay in the dirt. “Dude. You’re not supposed to swing that hard!”

“Why didn’t you block me?”

Frank lumbered over. “You guys okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Deion. “Guess I got distracted.”

Yazan frowned. “It’s kind of hard when…you know.” He chin-pointed toward the mythics.

Nico had to admit that the chaos was distracting. As Frank wrangled everybody back into lines to try again, Nico decided to step in.

“Will, you spar with Deion,” he said. “Yazan, let’s see what you’ve got.”

He squared off against the probatio and drew his Stygian blade.

Yazan’s jaw dropped. “Whoa. What is *that*?”

“Never mind the blade,” Nico said. “It helps to pay attention to it, yes, but you also have to be able to read body language. Which direction does your enemy turn? Which foot do they favor?”

“And we’re demigods!” Will added proudly. “We have a natural feel for this stuff. It just requires letting your instincts take over.”

“ADHD for the win,” said Nico. Then he beckoned to Yazan. “Raise your weapon.”

Yazan gulped. “That sword looks very sharp.”

Nico grinned mischievously. “It is.”

“Have you ever hurt yourself with it?”

Nico shot Will a warning look. “Not a word.”

Will simply smiled. He picked up an extra rudis and faced Deion.

“All right, demigods!” Frank shouted. “And…friends! On my command, let’s try to keep this round going for more than two seconds, okay?”

Deion frowned at Will. “You’ve been to Tartarus. You’re probably not afraid of *anything*.”

“Fear can be a *good* thing,” Will said.

Deion scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“Fear is natural,” said Will. “All demigods experience it. And when it happens, I try to tap into it. What should I be paying attention to? What makes me *truly* afraid?”

Yazan kept his eyes fixed on Nico’s blade. “I thought we were training so we *wouldn’t* be afraid.”

Nico chuckled. “I promise I’m not trying to sound like a know-it-all, but if there’s anything I’ve learned lately, it’s that you can’t stop emotions from bubbling up. So as much as I’d like to never feel pain or fear, they’re both going to happen.”

"*That* is what we're training for," added Will. "How to deal with the unexpected when it happens."

"Parati!" Frank yelled again. "Impellite!"

Before Nico and Will could engage their opponents, a scream went up from the opposite end of the line. Savannah stumbled back, dropping her sword like it was a venomous snake. She crouched and covered her head with her hands.

Frank rushed over. "Savannah! What's wrong?"

Arielle retreated. "I didn't touch her, I swear."

By the time Nico and Will reached her, Savannah was rocking back and forth, breathing so rapidly she was practically panting.

"I'm fine," she wheezed. Her eyes flicked wildly from one person to another until they landed on Nico. Her face was pale and sweaty.

He recognized something in her expression.

"Give her space." Will shouldered his way forward, always the medic, and offered her some water from his canteen. "The rest of you…keep training. Maybe over there." He waved toward the trenchworks a few yards away.

"You heard the man!" Frank did a good job masking his concern. "Let's move, let's move!"

As he herded the trainees across the field, Arielle sidled up to Nico.

"Will she be okay?" asked the empousa. She sounded more curious than concerned, like Savannah was a side character in a movie.

"I think so," said Nico. "Any idea what—?"

"Not her!" screamed Savannah. "Not her!" She pointed with a trembling hand at the empousa.

Will tried to calm her, breaking off a piece of ambrosia from his med kit.

Nico took Arielle's arm and led her away. "Maybe you should—"

"Yeah," Arielle agreed. "I really didn't— I never meant—"

"I know," Nico promised.

Arielle frowned and marched toward the others.

Nico glanced back. Will was encouraging Savannah to breathe, soothing her with kind words and chocolate like the gentle healer he was. He caught Nico's eyes and silently let him know the

plan: Nico should stay here. Will was going to take Savannah to the infirmary and get her checked out. Nico and Will had been together long enough that they could read each other that easily. Also, they'd been in situations like this an unfortunate number of times before.

Nico put his hand to his own heart. *Good luck. Love you.*

Then he went to rejoin the sparring session.

"All right, everyone," Frank was saying. "Let's get back to it. Impellite!"

The dry *crack* of wooden blades hitting one another filled the air again, but Nico could tell the trainees' hearts weren't it. There was no conversation. No enthusiastic shouts. Just cautious strikes and parries from both demigods and mythics.

Frank looked over as Nico joined him. "So, what's going on?"

Nico shook his head. "Not sure. Will is taking her to the infirmary just in case."

"That's a good plan."

"Is there anything else we should know?" Nico asked. "About Savannah's history with Arielle?"

Frank hesitated. "I don't think they ever met until camp. But Savannah came to this place under…intense circumstances. I'm not sure of the details, but I know she lost her parents…."

Frank couldn't seem to bring himself to say more. Nico didn't press, but his chest tightened. He had an idea of what had happened with Savannah. He resolved to get Will's opinion, though, before he mentioned it to anyone else.

The sparring wound down on its own, the mythics and demigods running out of steam, or maybe just feeling too cautious about causing another incident.

Frank sighed. "I think this training session has run its course."

Nico could feel his disappointment. "Yeah. Talk more at dinner?"

Frank nodded. "Okay, fighters! Good effort! Let's do a friendly run back to the camp!"

Off they went, running friendly, with Orcus flying loops through the air and Quinoa keeping pace by pole-vaulting along with his sword.

Well, thought Nico, *at least the day is almost over. Surely it can't get any worse.*

It got worse.

At dinnertime, Nico stood by the mess hall entrance, watching the flow of people. The Cocoa Puffs bounced around his feet, perhaps wondering why he wasn't heading inside so they could terrorize diners for table scraps.

A line of campers snaked away from a long counter laid out with various grilled meats and vegetables. Tonight's theme seemed to be kebabs, which meant everyone was running around with even more pointy objects than usual. Legionnaires laughed and joked with one another. Aurae and Lares floated through the hall. Torches burned cheerfully along the walls, illuminating the war banners and the golden eagle standard behind the officers' table. The atmosphere was relaxed…except for a thirty-foot-diameter zone of ostracism that surrounded the mythics' dinner table, separating them from everyone else.

Hazel was doing her best to set an example. She was sitting with the mythics, showing Orcus how to eat a kebab. The others poked glumly at the food.

Anytime one of them got up for more, the legionnaires parted around them like a school of fish making way for a shark. Otherwise, the mythics were studiously ignored.

It made Nico irritated…*angry*.

Savannah wasn't at dinner. Neither was Arielle.

At the officers' table, Will and Frank were having a heated conversation with Maurice, the centurion of the Second Cohort, maybe trying to explain what had happened during the training session. Maurice looked exasperated, like he was saying *I told you so!*

Nico didn't feel like joining them. He was still on edge, processing Savannah's freak-out. He and Will had already conferred, and they'd agreed on what had happened. Nico knew the symptoms: wide eyes, shallow breaths, the sheen of sweat coating Savannah's face.

It had looked like a panic attack.

Maybe something about Arielle had triggered Savannah. Maybe she was still dealing with the deaths of her parents. Whatever the case, the incident seemed like just the latest flare-up of a much bigger wildfire.

A sense of foreboding was burying itself underneath Nico's skin. He didn't have words for it. It all just felt…*off*.

Had his early days at Camp Half-Blood been this bad? The world hadn't felt right then, either. He'd felt out of place. He'd been afraid to get close to anyone, and he'd often disappeared for days at a time before returning. But he'd never felt like the campers were actively trying to exclude him…had he?

He was jolted from his thoughts when a meal tray hit the floor right next to him. A demigod with blond pigtails squealed and backed away. The room fell silent.

"What was that?" the girl shrieked.

"Sorry, dear," an earthy voice replied. Semele. "Sometimes I lose track of where I'm going. I didn't mean to walk through you."

The girl's eyes darted from side to side. "I—I can't see you! What did you *do* to me?"

Whispering broke out at the nearest tables. Some legionnaires got to their feet. Nico was the closest. He had to intervene before things got out of control.

He stepped in front of the girl with the pigtails. "Semele can't help that she's invisible. She meant no harm."

"No h-harm?" the girl spluttered.

Nico felt the floor tremble and crack around his feet, threatening an eruption of a fresh crop of undead. "Walk away," he told the girl. "Now."

The girl screamed and fled. The nearest campers fixed him with dark looks. He cursed under his breath, then turned in the direction of Semele's voice. "Follow me, will you?"

He stormed out of the mess hall, hoping the eidolon was behind him.

He didn't stop until he was outside the bathhouse. He paced back and forth, flexing his fingers to try squeezing out the anger.

At his side, a gray wisp of smoke coalesced and swirled, more visible in the evening shadows than she had been in the light.

"That was unfortunate," said Semele. "I apologize. I'm still adjusting."

"I know." Nico tried to control his tone. He didn't want to snap. "And I'm afraid I made it worse. I'm just wondering…can we actually figure out some way you could announce your presence so you don't frighten the other campers?"

There was a cold silence.

“Well,” Semele said finally, “we should be honest with each other. I’m an eidolon. They’re all going to be afraid of me no matter what I do.”

Nico sighed. “I hope that isn’t true.”

The gray smoke twisted in the air. “I have existed for millennia, son of Hades. First as a human. Then as…this. Often, what we hope for is not reality. Apparently, even this place cannot protect us.”

The bitterness in her voice caught Nico by surprise. “You were human once?”

No reply.

“What happened to our being honest with each other?” he asked. “You’ve been with us all day, haven’t you? Watching, listening. What was Arielle talking about back at your quarters…someone finding you if you left Camp Jupiter? Is something hunting you all?”

“Perhaps you should ask Johan,” Semele said. “He enjoys ancient history.”

She disappeared, leaving Nico staring into empty shadows.

He stood there, his nerves jangling. It felt like a thousand bees were buzzing in his mind.

The evening was cool, the sun nearly gone. Over the last year, Nico had learned to enjoy sunlight, but he still preferred nighttime. He loved the shadows. The silence. The certainty that this was his world. In the darkness, Nico felt most certain of his parentage and his sense of self.

That was what he needed right now, because Camp Jupiter was unearthing thoughts he hadn’t had in a while. He was remembering small incidents from his childhood, his time at Westover Hall, and even at Camp Half-Blood, when he’d felt excluded, teased, or bullied. Nothing big. Strange looks. Laughter behind his back. People leaving a table when he sat at it. Once, some joker had left a dead bird on his bedroll.

He’d pushed these things down, trying to erase them from his memory. He’d told himself that he’d chosen to stand apart wherever he went. Now he wasn’t so sure.

He started down the Via Praetoria, hoping to get away from the bustle of demigods now exiting the mess hall. His Puffs trailed behind him, rambunctious and squirrelly after sleeping through the day. He hoped they wouldn't spend all night terrorizing the camp.

In the road up ahead, he spotted Johan and Quinoa. They'd just left dinner and were ambling in his direction. Nico considered ducking into an alley. He wasn't sure he could take any more social interaction today. Then he saw two demigods trailing behind the mythics, grinning like they had something malicious in mind.

Nico didn't have to wait long. One of the Romans yelled, "Hey, monster! Heads up!"

He threw an apple that bounced off Johan's hairy, headless shoulders.

Nico's vision went red.

"Knock it off!" he yelled, marching toward the demigods. "Would you like me to tell your centurion what you're doing?"

He must have looked pretty scary emerging from the shadows with his army of mini demons. The campers' eyes widened. They turned and fled before Nico could get a good look at their faces.

Johan picked up the apple. A confused frown spread across his abdomen. "I do not understand. Why did they toss me a piece of fruit?"

"They threw it at you," Quinoa said with a snarl. "Nasty kids. I should chase 'em down and shove that apple—"

"No, no," Johan said. "Conflicts are to be expected. Besides, I quite like apple slices with my tea."

"Why do you have to be *so* polite?" Quinoa complained.

"Blemmyae are always polite. I am sorry if it is a problem." His frown deepened. "Oh, dear. That would mean my politeness is impolite. I am confused."

Nico's head began to ache. "I'll find out who those demigods were—make sure they're punished."

"I appreciate the sentiment," said Johan, "but you don't need to do that on my account."

"Listen to yourself," said Quinoa bitterly. "This is never going to work. We should do what Arielle said and leave this place."

Nico froze. "When did Arielle say that?"

“When do you think?” said the karpos. “After she tried to play nice in the sparring exercise and that other girl popped off like a corn kernel! Arielle’s been home ever since. She’s probably still sobbing. Your help ain’t helping, di Angelo.”

Nico didn’t think Quinoa was angry at him. *Grumpy and scowling* seemed to be the karpos’s default setting. Still, his words stung.

Nico couldn’t imagine Arielle crying about what had happened. Then again, if she’d suggested leaving camp despite the dangers involved, she must’ve been really upset.

He knew he should ask Johan about what Semele had said—to find out if he had more information about what the mythics feared beyond the boundaries of Camp Jupiter—but his heart was too heavy. He wasn’t sure it could handle any more weight tonight.

The two mythics walked on, leaving Nico by himself. Anger and disappointment swirled within him—anger at seeing the same thing he’d gone through himself repeating itself here, and disappointment that he hadn’t done more to stop it.

Nico sat on the edge of his bunk in the guest barracks while his Puffs piled next to him on the comforter.

“I’ll be outside,” said Will, his face radiating calm and love. He planted a soft kiss on Nico’s forehead. “Just tell him what you told me.”

Then he was gone.

Nico reached into the pocket of his bomber jacket. He pulled out a crystal pendant he carried for Iris-messages and tied it to the frame of the upper bunk, where it dangled and spun, catching light from the overhead fixture. Rainbows danced across the walls. He fished a golden drachma from his other pocket.

It would be late at Camp Half-Blood, on the opposite side of the country. Fortunately, as far as Nico knew, Olympian gods didn’t keep any sort of regular sleep schedule.

He tossed his coin into the rainbow light, making his plea as the offering disappeared.

“Show me Camp Half-Blood,” he said. “Dionysus.”

The air shimmered. The camp director’s face appeared bathed in a blue glow like he was watching TV in a dark room. His attention was clearly fixed on something other than the Iris-message.

“Come on!” Mr. D yelled. “*That’s* who you’re voting for? What about the alliance?”

“Hey, Mr. D,” Nico said. “Sorry to interrupt.”

Mr. D glanced over, apparently unsurprised by the call. The god’s face looked puffy and haggard, his expression disgruntled, but that was pretty much how he always looked. “Let me give you some advice, Nico di Angelo. Don’t ever get into *Survivor*. It represents the *worst* of humanity.”

“I…don’t really watch television. So I should be good there.”

“You’re blessed by the gods, then. Because it’s currently ruining my life.”

Mr. D waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. There was a muffled *BANG!* Pieces of glass and plastic sprayed across the god’s room as the blue light was extinguished. Apparently, Mr. D didn’t just turn off a TV when the programming annoyed him. He made it explode.

“What’s on your mind, Nico?” he asked.

The god’s expression was still very irritated. Nico hoped he could be more interesting than *Survivor*. He didn’t feel like being exploded tonight. Nevertheless, he forged ahead. His hands were trembling. “I think I need help.”

“Of course you do,” Mr. D said. “You are a demigod. A teenager. Part human. You will always need help.”

“Wow, thanks for telling me. Totally new information.”

That made Mr. D smile. “I do love your sarcasm, Nico. So what’s up?”

He took a deep breath. “Well—”

“Hold on.” Mr. D cut him off. “Do I need some popcorn? Is this that kind of talk?”

Nico couldn’t control it. He burst into tears.

Mr. D’s expression sobered. He said nothing, and just let Nico sob.

Nico felt so angry with himself, so *ashamed*.

“I’m sorry.” His voice quavered. “I don’t know where that came from.”

“Nico, when have I ever asked you to apologize to me for expressing something?”

He wiped his cheeks furiously. “Never.”

“So why would I start now?”

Nico was always amazed how quickly Dionysus could change his demeanor. One moment, he was the flippant, apathetic camp director they all loved to hate and hated to love. The next moment, he was *this* guy—the former human being who understood the most fractured mortal emotions and was willing to listen as Nico talked about them.

“I just…I guess I didn’t realize how much Camp Jupiter was affecting me.”

“What’s happening over there? Does Bacchus need to make an appearance? Because I have *no* problem smiting Romans.”

The idea of Mr. D’s Roman alter ego appearing out of nowhere and turning all the misbehaving legionnaires into dolphins or grapevines did have a certain appeal, but Nico shook his head.

“No, it’s not like that.” He gave Mr. D a quick summary of their first full day with the legion. “These mythics, as they call themselves—they’re an interesting bunch. Asterion, an empousa, a karpos, an eidolon, a blemmyae, a griffin.”

Dionysus nodded thoughtfully. “I threw a dinner party like that once. And the reaction of the legion?”

“They’re either afraid of the mythics, or making fun of them, or both. I understand that this is a strange experience for everyone, but I don’t know what to do with it all!” He fell silent. “It’s reminding me of what it was like when I first came to Camp Half-Blood.”

Mr. D smiled. “I remember those days. I used to joke with Chiron that you were a feral child and we were the first civilized people you’d ever been around.”

“Are you saying I was like a *wolf*?”

“No. More like…what’s that other territorial pack animal? A *nerd*. I know Bianca did her best looking after you, but you showed up here and quoted wildly erroneous card game stats to my face.” He sniffed disdainfully. “As if I wouldn’t have been the most powerful god in that deck.”

Nico laughed. It felt good, like the jagged pieces inside him were starting to mend. “You’re still bitter about that?”

“Bah. Aren’t we here to talk about *your* emotions?”

“Fine.” Nico took a moment to refocus. “I think one of the things that bothered me most…There’s this new legionnaire Savannah. She reacted *really* badly to Arielle, the empousa.” Nico explained what had happened on the Field of Mars.

Mr. D frowned. “A panic attack.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I’m curious why that in particular bothered you, though.” The god’s face loomed larger in the prismatic curtain of light. “As much as I tease you about that whole Misty Magic obsession—”

“Mythomagic.”

“I’ve already forgotten what you just said. My point is, you came to us primed to believe in the world of demigods, gods, and monsters, Nico. Whenever you were presented with mythical creatures, you *always* accepted them, no matter how terrifying they might have been. For some young demigods, however…it’s not so easy. They’re raised to believe the world is one way. Then they come to Camp Half-Blood and have to contend with a truth that doesn’t fit what they already know. Camp Jupiter is much the same, if not more difficult.”

“I guess I never considered that,” said Nico.

“That’s where *we* come in,” Mr. D continued. “It’s our job to help newcomers adjust—we counselors and directors and elder demigods.”

“Elder?” Nico grimaced. “I know I was born in the last century, but I’m technically still a teenager, remember?”

“But to someone like Savannah, you *are* an elder.”

Nico sat back on the bed. “That’s a good point.”

“One day, you’ll realize those are the only kind of points I have.”

Nico rolled his eyes. “One day, I’ll learn that you can’t be serious for more than three seconds.”

“I still want to know how *you’re* feeling,” Mr. D pressed. “You broke down crying a few minutes ago. Then you started talking about other people instead of yourself.”

Nico’s face flushed. He spotted his Cocoa Puff Shame, who looked like a hairless cat made of shadow, sticking its head out from under the comforter. Nico scratched its big ears and let a flood of memories wash over him: *stealing glances at Henry as they played Mythomagic, wetting the bed his first night alone at boarding school, running into the woods after screaming at Percy Jackson.*

“What’s going through your mind right now?” asked Mr. D.

“Shame,” Nico admitted.

“About?”

Where to even start? Nico wondered.

“The mythics feel unwelcome. The demigods are scared and suspicious. Hazel and Frank are barely holding everything together.”

“And you feel responsible,” Mr. D guessed.

“I came here to help,” Nico said. “What if I disappoint Hazel? What if I let Asterion and his friends down? I want to show everyone they can overcome their fears and coexist. All I’ve managed to do is make things worse.”

Mr. D thought for a moment. “You’re putting the blame entirely on yourself?”

Shame coursed through Nico again, though he was no longer petting the cacodemon. “No, but…I feel like I’m getting buried by this. All my old trauma is getting dredged up again. I can’t see past it. I thought I wouldn’t feel these things anymore.”

Dionysus wagged a finger at him. “Perhaps that’s the problem, Nico. None of us—not even us immortals—gets to experience an existence without emotions. We gods might feel things differently than you do, but we still feel them. Have you never seen the wrath of a god?”

“Sure. Plenty of times.”

“Have you not also seen grace? Or sadness? Or despair?”

“I have.”

“I know I joke a lot in our sessions together,” said Mr. D, “but the truth is, I’m not trying to wipe away your past trauma. That would be impossible. I’m trying to give you the tools to deal with all the skatá píta that life throws at you, if you’ll excuse my Greek. You’ve already done so much work. Look at the little blobs, for example. Your inner demons are now your best friends, aren’t they?”

Nico gazed down affectionately at his snoozing Cocoa Puffs. “They are.”

“You have your whole life to take care of yourself,” Mr. D said softly. “This isn’t like a demigod quest, where you seek out an item, solve a puzzle, defeat some horrible creature, and then it’s *done*. You’re doing this every day, every moment of your life. In the same vein, you can’t expect to create world peace between demigods and mythics in a matter of hours. Perhaps you shouldn’t race toward a finish line that doesn’t exist.”

Nico sighed. “I hate it when you’re helpful like this.”

“I can go back to bullying someone one millionth of my age if you’d like.”

“Gods, yes. Please do that.”

Mr. D chuckled. “Keep me updated, Nico. Now if you’ll excuse me, I simply must find out who survives the quest for fire. Prometheus could *never*.” He glanced at where his TV used to be. “Hmm, and it appears I must also remember how to create a new television set. Good-bye!”

After the Iris-message faded, Nico lay back on the bunk bed, his emotions still churning like kicked-up river sediment. It was strange to think about how much his relationship with Mr. D had changed over the last year. It wasn’t a *bad* strange. Just…different.

He knew Mr. D was right. He needed to be patient, and not so hard on himself, but that didn’t make the discomfort go away.

Loneliness scooted over, examining Nico with its single big eye, and then it snuggled against his chest. Nico pulled it close, letting images from his past drift by like the current around a canoe. He wondered if everyone else struggled as much as he did. Maybe…but it sure didn’t seem that way.

He slipped deeper into his memories.

He didn't even realize when Will came back into the room until he felt his boyfriend's weight sink onto the bed next to him. Nico opened his eyes.

Will gazed tenderly at him, and then at Loneliness cuddled in Nico's arms. "Everything okay?" he asked.

Nico let go of the Cocoa Puff. It scurried back to the demonic cuddle puddle on the comforter.

"A little better," Nico admitted. "But I could use a hug."

"Favorite tool in my arsenal," Will said with a smile.

Will held him in a warm embrace, and Nico really *did* feel better because of it.

If the dictionary had an illustration for the word *uneventful*, Nico figured it would show a picture of everything that happened during his second full day at Camp Jupiter. The caption would read: *This is not uneventful.*

The chaos started at breakfast. Nico and Will had just finished their predawn calisthenics-and-tango workout with Lavinia's Fifth Cohort when they strolled into the mess hall and saw Asterion loading up his tray at the breakfast-taco bar.

"Hello, friends!" Asterion called.

Unfortunately, the bull-man wasn't watching his surroundings. He raised his arm to wave and knocked the tray right out of Centurion Maurice's hands. Scrambled eggs went flying.

"Dude!" Maurice cried out, wiping food off his purple Camp Jupiter tee.

"I'm so sorry," Asterion rumbled. "Let me help."

He leaned down to pick up the fallen tray, but when he stood up again, his horn hooked the tablecloth. Since he wasn't a magician, when Asterion pulled the cloth out from under the buffet, the entire contents of the taco bar went flying in a volcanic eruption of cheese, eggs, tortillas, and chorizo that rained down on the nearest sitting area, which happened to belong to the elite First Cohort.

"Oh, gods." Will tented his hands over his mouth as he watched one of the most fearsome characters in Greek mythology stutter apologies and pick corn chips out of the Romans' hair. The tablecloth still hung from Asterion's horn like a hot-sauce-stained drape.

"Leave!" pleaded Terrence, the centurion of the First Cohort. "We'll get it. Please stop helping!"

Wind spirits rushed in to clean the disaster area. Asterion hung his head and lumbered toward the exit. Nico and Will escorted him out of the mess hall.

"You didn't mean any harm," Nico consoled him, painfully aware that he'd said the same thing about Semele the night before when she'd walked through the girl with pigtails.

"It is my fault nonetheless." Asterion heaved a sigh. "I am not used to operating in such small spaces, with so many small people."

Nico heard the sadness in his voice. Belatedly, he realized that Asterion had been the only mythic in the mess hall. Where were the others?

Before he could ask, Hazel came running down the Via Praetoria and crashed right into him. "There you are! I—" She faltered when she saw Asterion. "Why are you wearing breakfast? Never mind! Nico, I need your help."

"What's up?"

"No time to explain!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the nearest shadow.

It was the first time Nico had shadow-traveled as someone else's passenger. The sensation was *violent*. He felt like a piece of origami being twisted and folded over and over. Was this what it was like for demigods of different parentages? He suddenly felt bad for ever having put anyone through this.

They stumbled out into a patch of sunlight with the roar of traffic all around them. Nico shielded his eyes. He flinched as an SUV raced past, blaring its horn.

He was back on the median of Highway 24, right outside the Caldecott Tunnel. Cars zipped by in both directions.

"Why are we—?"

"Over there!" Hazel pointed.

Nico's throat constricted.

About thirty yards away, stuck smack in the middle of the southbound lanes, the tiny griffin Orcus cowered in fear on the asphalt, his head tucked beneath his wings.

"Oh, *no*," Nico muttered. "What is he doing *there*?"

"I made a mistake," Hazel said. "Orcus wanted to start surveillance, but he wasn't ready. He flew too far outside camp, I guess, and…" She gestured helplessly at the griffin.

Nico started to ask why Orcus couldn't simply fly away. Then the answer dawned on him. Just like with Savannah the day before, panic attacks weren't logical. They robbed you of reason and paralyzed your ability to do even the simplest of things.

"I tried to get to him," Hazel said, "but—"

"No shadows in the middle of the highway," Nico guessed. Even if they'd tried, shadow-travel didn't have pinpoint accuracy. Hazel or Nico might teleport right in front of an eighteen-wheeler. In fact, if it weren't for the double-wide lines painted between the second and third lanes, Orcus wouldn't have had any room to cower. It was a miracle he hadn't been hit yet.

“He was calling for you,” Hazel told Nico. “That’s why I came to get you.”

“For *me*?” Nico wasn’t sure whether to feel honored or singled out. “Okay, okay, let’s get as close as we can.”

They made their way down the median, horns blaring and drivers yelling at them to get out of the middle of the highway, as if they might not have thought of that themselves.

“Orcus!” Nico called when they were within shouting range. “I’m here!”

“Nico?” The griffin poked his head out from beneath his wings. He looked so small and scared. The panic in his eyes broke Nico’s heart. “H-help! Help me!”

“Hold on, buddy!” Nico said. “I’m coming!”

He turned to Hazel. “Can you still manipulate the Mist?”

“I— Yes. Yes, I can do that. What do you need?”

Nico told her his idea. “It’s going to have to be gradual, though, so we don’t cause a million-car pileup.”

Hazel nodded. She took a breath and stared intently at the griffin. The air turned colder.

Right in front of Orcus, a bright orange traffic barrel shimmered into existence, with a flashing light and a sign that read ROAD WORK AHEAD. The traffic slowed and veered around it.

“Perfect,” Nico said. “Now if you can make me a path…”

Hazel kept her gaze on the griffin, as if she were shielding him with sheer willpower…which she pretty much was. A row of traffic cones with lights and arrows popped into being, one after the other, slowly encroaching on the fast lanes, directing traffic to the right. Cars swerved and laid on their horns, but none of them crashed into one another. Nico supposed Bay Area drivers were used to unexpected obstacles. After another minute, Hazel had created a slowdown guaranteed to ruin thousands of commuters’ mornings, but the lanes between Nico and Orcus were clear.

“Can’t—hold it—long,” Hazel warned through gritted teeth. Her eyes were tearing up; her legs shook from the effort.

Nico hopped the guardrail and dashed toward Orcus.

“I got you,” he said, scooping up the griffin, and then he gasped in pain as Orcus dug his sharp claws into Nico’s forearms. Apparently, grabbing a panicking griffin was as dangerous as grabbing a drowning swimmer. Orcus was a shivering ball of nerves, no heavier than an average house cat. Judging from the smell of his fur and feathers, he’d been farting. A lot.

“I’m sorry,” the griffin whimpered. “What is this place? What are those things?”

Nico realized he meant the cars. Had he never seen a highway before?

“Doesn’t matter right now,” said Nico. “We’ve got to get you out of here.”

This part should’ve been easy: just cut across two lanes to get back to the guardrail. But at that moment, Hazel’s knees buckled. The illusion of traffic barriers vaporized. This left nothing between Nico and—of course—an eighteen-wheeler, whose driver was so delighted to have the fast lanes clear ahead of him that he hit the gas. Apparently, because the Mist had a sense of humor, the driver didn’t see Nico holding his griffin.

Nico panicked. No time to jump aside. No time to concentrate.

His eyes happened to fix on the metal doors that marked the entrance to Camp Jupiter. Two guards there were gesturing at him frantically, urging him to move. That was all Nico needed. He jumped forward, into the shadow of the truck that was about to hit him, Orcus howling in his arms.

A flash of cold darkness, and he materialized at the tunnel’s entrance, collapsing at the feet of the sentries.

“Julius Caesar!” cursed Yazan. “That was close.”

He and the other sentry, Deion, helped Nico to his feet.

“What did you just *do*?” asked Deion. “Can you beam yourself around like on *Star Trek*?”

Nico didn’t bother answering. He was too busy checking Orcus for injuries.

“I—I am fine, Nico di Angelo,” said Orcus, pressing his beak against Nico’s chest. “Thank you for rescuing me. I knew you would.”

Nico held Orcus tighter as his own head spun from the shadow-travel. He felt fiercely protective of this tiny, farting cat-bird. He wanted to wrap Orcus in one of Asterion’s warmest, fuzziest cable-knit sweaters and insulate him from all harm.

“What happened?” Nico asked him. “How did you end up in the middle of the highway?”

The griffin blinked. “Is—is that what the accursed path of loud death beasts is called?”

Yazan and Deion looked at each other.

“You’ve never seen a *highway* before?” asked Yazan. “Or a car?”

“How is that possible?” asked Deion. “They’re *everywhere*.”

Nico glared at the guards, hoping they'd understand and lay off the criticism. But Orcus just ruffled his feathers, readjusting himself in Nico's arms.

"I am newly regenerated from Tartarus after many centuries," he told the sentries. "I saw very little except green hills as Asterion led us to New Rome. *That* mortal world I recognized. *This* . . ."

The griffin stared down at the roaring highway, the sprawl of lights and houses and noise that was the Bay Area. "What have you *done* to the place? I came over the hill, thinking I would make a simple reconnaissance flight, and—it all hit me at once. The smell alone!" He farted for emphasis. "I shut down, dropped from the sky like seagull poop. I truly am useless."

"Hey, now," Yazan said. "You're *not* useless."

Deion nodded agreement. "First time seeing all this? That would turn anybody into seagull poop. You're a brave little dude."

Orcus puffed his feathers. "Do you think so?"

Just then, Hazel came trudging up the hill, sweaty and out of breath from her boxing match with the Mist. "Oh, thank the gods," she said. "What happened…?"

Her voice trailed off as she caught Nico's eye. She got the message. *Something important is going on here. Let it play out.*

"The last time I was in the mortal world," Orcus continued, clearly happy to have a sympathetic audience, "I could not even fly freely. I spent most of my life in a private zoo. In a *cage*. A man of great power kept me there."

"I'm sorry," said Deion. "That's terrible."

Yazan shuddered. "I hate cages. All animals deserve better. And mythics, of course."

A tingle went up Nico's spine. This was the first time he'd heard a rank-and-file legionnaire use the term *mythic* without even thinking about it.

"Thank you," said Orcus. "There is not much of the mortal world I understand, but I am trying."

Cuddled in Nico's arms, the griffin's body was shivering in a different way now, almost like…purring.

Before Nico could process that, an Iris-message flashed into existence at his side. It was like the one Nico had gotten at the Camp Half-Blood dining hall—a perfect oval, with brighter colors and a clearer picture than Nico was used to. Had the Romans invented high-definition Iris-messages? HDIM?

Will's face stared out at them. He looked worried.

“Nico!” he said. “Sorry if I’m interrupting, but could you…uh…meet me at the principia?”

Hazel leaned over so Will could see her, too. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh!” Will’s next words came out in a torrent. “Hi, Hazel. Hello. Howareyou? Ihopeyou’regoodbecauseeverythingisfinehere.”

Nico held back a laugh. “Uh…sure, I’m on my way.”

“Do you need me, too?” Hazel asked.

“Oh, definitely not!” Will squeaked. “Not at all! We’re all good! Thank you!”

The Iris-message disappeared.

Hazel frowned at Nico. “I’m coming with you for sure now.”

“Orcus,” Nico said, “how you feeling, buddy? You want to come with us?”

“He can stay here, if he likes,” Yazan offered.

“Yeah,” Deion agreed. “We can explain about highways and stuff. Give him some safety tips.”

“I would like that!” Orcus fluttered out of Nico’s arms and landed next to the two sentries.

Hazel and Nico left them chatting amiably about the nature of automobiles, and then headed through the metal doors and back down the tunnel toward camp. Neither sibling was in any shape to try more shadow-travel.

“Sometime,” Nico said, “you need to explain why you guys have better Iris-messages.”

Hazel laughed. “You mean the *tesserae*?”

“The *what*?”

She smirked. “You Greeks, always playing catch-up. Be easier to show you later. I’m more interested in what we saw back there.” She pointed over her shoulder. “What just happened with Yazan and Deion and Orcus?”

A warm feeling spread through Nico’s chest. “I think,” he said, “that was the beginning of Romans getting along with mythics. Maybe this isn’t going to be impossible after all.”

CHAPTER 12

Nico's optimism lasted approximately twelve minutes.

By then, he was in the principia with Will and Johan, after Will had frantically explained to Hazel why she couldn't come into her own headquarters because Johan was inside, freaking out. The blemmyae had wanted only Nico's help. Hazel had reluctantly agreed on the condition that if Nico, Will, or Johan wrecked her desk or burned down the building, she would string them up by their ankles.

Now Nico stood in the office between Will and Johan, frowning at the latest installment of *Nico di Angelo: Disaster Detective*.

"Please tell me what I'm looking at," he said.

The blemmyae wrung his hands. "I didn't know what to do! I didn't know!"

In front of them, a demigod was frozen mid-step, as if he'd been petrified while running toward the door. Nico couldn't be sure, but he thought it was the same kid who'd thrown the apple at Johan the previous night. Either that, or it was the creepiest, most realistic statue ever made. The kid's eyes were wide open, his expression stuck somewhere between surprise and terror. Balanced between the fingers of his outstretched hands was a multisided metal object about the size of a baseball.

"How did he end up like this?" Nico asked.

Johan paced nervously, pulling at the hair on his shoulders. "He— I was organizing the principia's archives, cataloging artifacts like we talked about…."

He pointed at the metal security door that, Nico knew, led downstairs to the legion's treasure vaults. "Frank gave me permission! And then this young man"—he gestured at the demigod statue—"came in and said he needed to borrow a magical item."

Nico studied the frozen kid. "The thing he's holding?"

Johan couldn't nod, not having a head, but he did bow several times, reminding Nico of one of those dippy bird toys that can drink from a glass of water.

"It's a dodecahedron," Johan explained.

"That…is a word," said Will. "I don't know what it means."

“It’s a shape!” Johan said. “With twelve equal sides!”

“Wait, is it part of a game?” said Nico, who imagined one of the dice from a Mythomagic set, only blown up to much larger proportions. “Are we supposed to roll it?”

“That is not how its magic works,” said Johan.

“Wait,” said Will. “It’s magic, and you just *gave* it to him?”

“No! Well, yes!” Johan wailed. “He said he had permission. He told me he was studying the god Vulcan’s greatest inventions. He said that if I *didn’t* hand it over, we would both get in trouble, and I *definitely* did not want to get in trouble!”

Will raised a hand. “So he manipulated you. He knew that blemmyae are exceptionally polite, and he took advantage.”

Johan straightened his shoulders. “I *am* very polite.”

Nico’s headache was coming back. Like most sequels, it was bigger, louder, and more painful. He squinted at the dodecahedron in the legionnaire’s hand. “Johan, did he *know* what he was asking for?”

“I can’t be sure,” said the blemmyae. “But he was in the process of throwing it at me when he froze this way, so…” The blemmyae’s mouth fell open, exposing his abdominal cavity all the way back to his spine. “Oh, dear. Does that mean he was trying to freeze *me*? And he got the controls wrong? That really wasn’t very polite at all!”

Nico didn’t know what to say at first. Apparently, this kid had tried to pull a prank on the blemmyae that had ridiculously backfired. Nico was tempted to just leave the demigod frozen there and tell Hazel he was like that when they found him. Maybe the praetors could use him as a toga rack. He doubted Will and Johan would go for that, though. They were both too polite.

“Johan,” Will said, “tell us about dodecahedrons, please. How do they work?”

“Oh!” Despite Johan’s agitation, his eyes lit up at the chance to share his knowledge. “You see, in recent years, humans have been unearthing these devices, unsure what the Romans used them for. But of course, regular mortals wouldn’t understand, would they? Thousands of years ago, Roman demigods designed dodecahedrons to ensnare any mythical creature, or anyone with godly parentage. If you have four or more devices, you can create a perimeter to confine a large number of creatures. If you have a single dodecahedron…well, as you can see, once it is primed, just touching it can trigger paralysis. Which is why this demigod is currently unable to move.”

Nico grimaced. “So I guess you don’t know how to *un*-trigger it.”

“Of course I do!” Johan looked offended. “One simply has to use all ten fingers to apply pressure simultaneously to ten of the plates, while aligning the remaining two plates toward the target.”

If Will had looked any more confused, he would have been turned into a meme with physics equations floating around his face. “So…if you know how to release him, why haven’t you?”

Johan stared at him blankly. “Do you think that’s what he would want? I’m just so flustered! I thought perhaps he was doing research on what it felt like to be trapped!” He turned to Nico. “I knew *you* would know what to do. Can you please help me? Then we can all have a nice cup of tea!”

Nico imagined Mr. D’s voice in the back of his mind: *Breathe, Nico. Do not attempt to strangle the blemmyae. He has no neck.*

“Is it safe to touch the dodo-box?” Will asked, examining the device.

“The dodeca—” Johan stopped himself, probably remembering that it wasn’t polite to correct people. “Of course. It’s already been triggered.”

Nico yanked the device from the frozen kid’s hands. It was hollow, probably made of copper, with a hole in the middle of each plate and little knobs wherever the corners of three plates met. It definitely was like the twelve-sided die he used for Mythomagic games, only much bigger. He spread his fingertips until each was covering a different plate. Then he pointed the seam between the two remaining plates at the petrified doofus.

“Like this?” he asked Johan.

“That’s it,” Johan said. “Now if you press…”

Nico did.

The kid unfroze, falling forward onto his outstretched palms.

Nico smiled down at him. “Had a good time, did you?”

“Uhhh…” The camper’s eyes darted from Nico to Will to Johan. “I didn’t…It wasn’t— I was just doing research—”

“On how to play pranks on Johan,” Nico supplied. “You should tell your centurion what you did. Your praetors will know about this soon enough, so…maybe get ahead of it.”

“I—uh—yes,” the kid sputtered. Then he scrambled to his feet and ran from the principia.

“We didn’t even get his name,” said Will.

“Don’t need it.” Nico handed the dodecahedron to Johan. “That kid is so scared I don’t think he’ll cause any more trouble.”

Johan twirled the dodecahedron by two of its knobs, which fortunately did not turn any of them into statues. “How badly have I messed up? Will they ever let me work in the archives again?”

Will placed a comforting hand on the blemmyae’s shoulder, which was also his forehead. “Hey, what that kid did to you was unfair. You shouldn’t have given him anything from the archives, not without Hazel’s or Frank’s written permission. But live and learn. We all make mistakes.”

Johan’s eyes widened. “You mean it’s not just me?”

Nico smiled. He wasn’t sure if Johan was really that naive or if he just had an obtuse sense of humor, but either way, he was starting to appreciate the blemmyae’s style.

“I’m still learning this myself,” he offered, “but it’s actually polite to set boundaries for yourself. You *can* tell someone no, and it doesn’t make you rude.”

“Hmm,” Johann said. “I’m not sure I understand that.”

“It’s okay. We can work on it! You can practice with us.”

Johan hesitated, and then set the dodecahedron on the praetors’ desk. “But not right now. I believe I will go home and brew a pot of tea.” He glanced at Nico. “Did I set boundaries correctly?”

“Great job,” Nico said.

“Yay!” Johan clapped his hands and bounded out of the office.

Once he was gone, Nico let out a long sigh. “How is it we’re not even halfway through the day and I’m already exhausted?”

“Tell me about it,” his boyfriend said, leaning his head against Nico’s. “What did Hazel need you for earlier, anyway?”

Nico shared what had happened with Orcus on Highway 24, and how he’d left the griffin chatting away with Yazan and Deion.

“That’s progress!” said Will. “We *are* making a difference.”

Nico remembered his conversation with Dionysus—how this wasn’t a quest, and there was no finish line.

“I hope so,” he said. “It’s hard to tell.”

“Oh, trust me.” Will smiled. “I’m usually right.”

“You’re so old and wise.”

“Okay, calm down.”

“Deeply, deeply old.”

“Aren’t we only a year apart?”

Nico didn’t know the answer to that, any more than he knew dodecahedrons from dinosaurs. Like Hazel, he’d been born in a different century. He hadn’t really aged for most of that time, but he *had* been conscious and active. So was he a teen, a hundred-year-old fossil, or something in between?

All he knew was that Will was his peer in every way that mattered.

“Come on.” He planted a kiss on Will’s cheek. “Let’s see what other fires we can put out.”

As it turned out, the next fire was Arielle’s hair.

That afternoon, while Will continued to drill with the Fifth Cohort—which he *totally* didn’t complain about—Nico found himself back on the Field of Mars. Savannah had told him she wanted to give sparring with the empousa another try, and while Nico wasn’t sure this was a good idea, he admired Savannah’s determination.

It was just the three of them, standing on an expanse of packed dirt under a surprisingly hot winter sun. Sweat beaded on Nico’s forehead as he watched the two girls square off with their wooden practice swords.

Savannah had strapped a leather cuirass over her camp tee and leg guards over her jeans. Her long red hair fell loosely across her shoulders. She wore an expression of intense concentration, her green eyes and orange freckles all seeming to gather in the center of her face as she focused on a point just beyond the tip of her nose. She didn’t look like someone who’d recently had a full-blown panic attack, but Nico knew appearances could be deceiving.

As for Arielle, Nico was just glad she hadn’t fled camp yet. She’d reluctantly agreed to meet Savannah for another round of practice as long as Nico served as referee.

The empousa's flaming hair guttered and flickered in the breeze. She wore a pink tank top and white wide-legged skater pants today, so you couldn't tell she had mismatched legs until you looked at her feet—one bronze, and the other a donkey's hoof. If she'd really spent last night sobbing, Nico couldn't tell. Her eyes were red, but they were always red. Her frown conveyed worry and caution. Judging from her tense stance, she was taking this rematch seriously.

"Okay, you two," Nico said. "We're going to do this one step at a time. We're just working on form for now. Savannah, don't forget to breathe. Concentrate on Arielle's blade and watch where she puts her feet."

She nodded. "I can do that."

"Perfect. Arielle, nothing fancy. Just strike, parry, strike, parry."

"Yes," the empousa said tightly.

Savannah brought her rudis up into a defensive position, planting her feet slightly apart.

"Starting slowly with Arielle," Nico said. "Savannah, just block her swings. Don't think too hard about it or worry about how you look, okay?"

She nodded. "Got it."

"Begin," Nico commanded.

They exchanged strikes, almost in slow motion. Savannah seemed to get the hang of it quickly. She pivoted to block, then swung from the opposite side. They picked up speed, got a rhythm going.

"Not bad," Nico said, slowly circling the two. "One of the great things about being a demigod is that we have an innate ability to focus our attention when we need to. It's not always perfect, though, so we need to practice honing it."

They picked up the pace some more, pride swelling in Nico's chest as Savannah managed to parry every one of Arielle's attacks.

"And stop!" Nico grinned. "See? You're a natural, Savannah."

She lowered her sword. "I'm sorry for being so dramatic yesterday."

She directed the apology at Nico, avoiding Arielle's gaze.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," he said. "*Especially* with me. We all get scared and overwhelmed, even after years of experience."

Savannah frowned, apparently finding that hard to believe.

“You did well, demigod,” Arielle said.

It was an innocuous comment, said with respect, but Savannah’s face drained of color. She made the mistake of locking eyes with Arielle.

Then, to Nico’s horror, Savannah screamed and charged.

Savannah swung down—*hard*—at Arielle’s head. The empousa barely managed to evade the strike.

“What are you doing?” Arielle yelled.

Savannah didn’t answer. She pulled back the blade, gripping it with both hands like a baseball bat, and swung again.

This time, Arielle wasn’t fast enough. Savannah’s wooden blade smacked her across the arm so hard it broke the skin. Arielle’s flaming hair roared higher, like someone had thrown gasoline on it.

“Stop that!” yelled the empousa. “Leave me alone!”

Nico jumped between them. “Savannah! Drop the sword!”

Savannah’s face twisted into a mask of rage. She threw her sword aside in disgust, then screamed again like she wanted the entire world to hear her.

“It’s her fault!” Savannah howled. “She did it!”

“I did nothing!” Arielle shot back.

Savannah rushed forward. Nico blocked her path, but Savannah’s strength surprised him. She tackled him, and they both crashed into the ground.

Savannah rolled off him. She drew in her knees and then let loose a terrible sob. “She did it,” she said again. “She killed my parents!”

The whole world seemed to drop out from under Nico, taking his heart along with it. He struggled to his feet and looked at Arielle, who was wide-eyed with disbelief.

“What?” the empousa asked, cradling her wounded arm. “I don’t even know who you are! I haven’t *killed* anyone in a long time!”

“It was you, or your kind.” Savannah shivered. The anger was draining out of her body, leaving her listless and defeated. The blankness in her eyes worried Nico even more than her attack.

“My *kind*?” Arielle demanded. “So now I’m responsible for every empousa? We’re all the same?”

“Arielle,” Nico warned. “It might be best if you go back to your quarters.”

“But, Nico, I didn’t—”

“I know. I believe you. But *please*.”

Arielle stomped, cracking the dirt beneath her donkey hoof. “*This* is why we have to leave.” A blood tear trickled down her cheek. “I don’t care if they catch me! I don’t care if they *judge* me—it couldn’t be worse than the judgment I’m getting right here!”

She turned and marched off toward the mythics’ quarters.

Nico filed her comments away for later. He needed to find out what she meant. But at the moment, Savannah’s condition was the bigger problem.

He knelt in front of her. As angry as he was with her for unfairly attacking Arielle, this wasn’t the moment to scold her. If her parents had been killed by empousai…no wonder Arielle’s presence had triggered her.

Her stare was unfocused. He could tell she was far away. He remembered what that felt like. A panic attack could be frightening, but it could also feel like everything was happening to someone else.

“Savannah,” he said, “I need you to breathe. In and out, slowly.”

He helped bring her back to herself with breathing exercises—the very ones that Mr. D had taught him over the past few months.

Finally, she seemed to regain her composure, but when she raised her eyes to Nico, rage still smoldered in them.

“Why is she allowed to be here?” Savannah asked. “Why are any of them? They ruined my life.”

They.

Monsters. All monsters.

Not so long ago, Nico wouldn’t have questioned Savannah’s statement. Now everything felt a lot more complicated. He thought about what Mr. D had told him—that the job of elder demigods was to help kids like Savannah adjust to their new world. Nico had botched that completely. He felt like he’d failed today worse than Asterion or Orcus or Johan.

Nico swallowed his resentment and guilt. “Let’s get you to the infirmary,” he said. “Then we’ll figure out what to do next, okay?”

He helped her to her feet, and as they walked slowly back toward camp, Nico felt lost.

He had no idea how he was going to fix this.

Dinner that night was tense. Stories about what had happened to Savannah had spread through camp, and from the whispers and snippets that Nico caught, most of them were false. One claimed that Arielle had attacked Savannah and taunted her about her parents' death. Another said that Arielle had come to Camp Jupiter specifically to torment her victim further.

Nico did his best to set the record straight, but gossip was harder to kill than the Lernaean Hydra. As he sat at the head table with Will, Hazel, and Frank, he was angry.

He stabbed his hamburger with his fork, which wasn't fair to the burger. "If I'd known Savannah had lost her parents to an empousa attack, I would never have asked her to train with Arielle."

Hazel and Frank exchanged an embarrassed look.

"We didn't know ourselves until you told us," said Hazel. "All Savannah ever shared was that her parents died shortly before Lupa found her."

Frank turned to Will. "Lupa's the wolf goddess who finds Roman demigods and leads them to camp. She, ah, doesn't usually give us much context about the recruits she brings."

Hazel pushed around her French fries half-heartedly. "This is a disaster. What have I done?"

Will squeezed her hand. "There's no point in trying to assign blame. We just have to figure out what to do now."

"And what is that, exactly?" Nico grumbled.

The table fell into silence. The four demigods stared at their food.

Frank sighed. "Hazel, you know I love you, and you know that I think you did the right thing by letting Asterion and his friends stay here."

Her face fell. "But now you think I should ask them to leave?"

"No," he said. "I mean…Gods, I don't know. It's just…as praetor, I have to put the safety of our demigods first, right?"

Hazel glared at her boyfriend. "Do you think I'm not?"

"That's not what I said!"

“Hey,” Will interceded. “We’re all on the same side here. Let’s take a breath.”

Hazel scowled, clearly in no mood to take a breath. “Arielle did nothing wrong. Can we at least agree that she is *not* the empousa who killed Savannah’s parents?”

“Of course she isn’t,” said Frank, but then he hesitated. “I think?”

Nico shook his head. “I saw the way she reacted when Savannah accused her. She was surprised, shocked, even insulted. There’s no way it was her.”

“And yet…” Frank scanned the room. No laughter tonight. No smiles. Just hushed conversations and grim expressions. Fear hung in the air, sharp and heavier than the grease from the deep fryers.

With impeccably bad timing, Asterion and Johan chose that moment to walk into the mess hall. The whispering died. Heads turned. Asterion froze like…well, a bull in headlights. He touched Johan’s arm, perhaps about to suggest they turn around and settle for tea and cookies back at their quarters.

Nico’s anger boiled to the surface. He stood and called, “Asterion! Johan! Come join us!”

“Nico…?” Will murmured. Nico assumed the rest of his question would have been *are you* trying *to start a riot?*

After a moment’s hesitation, Asterion and Johan made their way to the praetors’ table. The legionnaires returned to their meals, trying to ignore the mythics. Nico had to give the Romans credit for one thing: they were more disciplined than the Greeks. If this had been Camp Half-Blood, he was pretty sure the mess hall would have devolved into name-calling, hamburger-throwing, and fistfights.

“Hello, demigods,” Asterion said, his voice somber. “I’ve told Arielle to stay within the confines of our shelter tonight. How is the girl?”

“She’s okay,” said Will. “She’s resting in her barracks right now.”

“I am glad.”

The bull-man remained standing. It was clear to Nico that Asterion didn’t know what to say or do next, any more than they did.

“Ooh,” Johan said, apparently not reading the mood. “Will Solace, I would like to eat your hamburger.”

Will pushed his tray over. “Have at it.”

Johan took a seat and rubbed his hands eagerly. “Thank you. I am learning to set boundaries!”

Nico started to say something about boundaries not extending to other people's food, but he decided not to. It wasn't polite to correct people. Also, at least one of them should enjoy dinner.

"Asterion," Frank said, shifting in his chair, "there isn't any possibility that Arielle—?"

"No."

"You didn't let me finish my question."

"Because I already know what you will ask. Could Arielle indeed be the empousa who stole that young girl's parents from her? The answer is no. Arielle is my oldest friend. She was, in fact, the one who convinced me that we did not have to hunt and kill demigods."

Hazel gave Frank a pointed look. Nico tried not to do the same, because he didn't want to kill the guy with pointed looks.

"I'm sorry for doubting," Frank said.

The bull-man bowed his head. "I do not blame you, Praetor Zhang. We *were* once monsters. Our entire purpose was to bring torment and death to your world. Many of us have returned over and over to act out this destiny. And, let us be honest, my friends and I are the exceptions. Most of our kindred in Tartarus are *still* monsters. Can we blame mortals for despising the sight of us?"

"I think I've been too hung up on that," said Frank, and he bowed his head. "My anger…sometimes it gets the best of me."

"That is understandable, demigod," said Asterion. "We mythics are constantly in touch with our anger, and we know how easily it can distract us."

"But I should know better," he said, and then looked to Hazel. "Remember how hard it was for me to control my shape-shifting when I was younger?"

Her eyes went wide. "Oh. *Oh*. I kinda forgot about that. You're such an expert these days!"

Johan furrowed his mighty, muscular brow, which was a sight that Nico's mind couldn't quite wrap itself around. "I am confused, Praetor Frank. Shape-shifting? Is that something all demigods can do?"

Frank laughed. "Very few, actually. It's one of the neat things about being a legacy. My family is descended from Poseidon's grandson Periclymenus, so most of us can shape-shift."

"That's so *cool*!" said Will, his eyes alight with awe. "Quick, change into a blueberry muffin!"

"He can't shape-shift into food, only living creatures," said Hazel.

“Well, not with that attitude,” said Nico, grinning.

“One time he destroyed the barracks by morphing into a large, angry hippopotamus.” She shook her head. “Certainly no Moo Deng.”

“Not the point!” said Frank, and he gazed at Johan and Asterion again. “What I was trying to say is that I remember how hard it was to be different, especially when I couldn’t control my changes. It was so isolating and *lonely*.”

“Yes,” said Asterion somberly. “That is…how most of us feel. This is why Arielle wants us to leave.”

“And…what do you think of that idea?” asked Will. He was probably the best of them to ask that question. He was able to make it sound simply interested, rather than hopeful or disapproving.

Asterion’s hesitation filled Nico with dread. “I do not believe she is right. There is nowhere for us to go. We have been rejected by our own kind. We would not be welcomed back to Tartarus.”

Johan had been trying to savor Will’s hamburger, eating it in small bites, but this was difficult since his mouth was so enormous. Finally, he emptied the whole plate into his abdominal cavity and chewed with gusto.

“Yum!” he said. “I will now eat everyone else’s food.”

“No,” Will said gently. “Because I am setting boundaries.”

“Oh!” Johan looked delighted. “That was very good, Will Solace! We are learning together!”

Nico was hesitant to bring down the one person who was enjoying himself, but he felt like he needed to ask. “Johan…yesterday Semele told me you might know more about, er, the threats you would face if you left camp. Is there anything you can tell us?”

The blemmyae turned his huge blue eyes toward Asterion.

“Speak freely.” The bull-man sounded melancholy.

Johan dabbed his mouth with Will’s napkin. “This may be difficult for you to understand, but we mythics often see and hear things while we sleep. Sometimes these experiences are quite vivid. We call them *dreams*.”

The demigods all looked at one another like, *Who’s going to tell him?*

“We have those too,” Nico said at last.

Johan gasped.

Asterion looked startled. “Truly?”

“Fascinating,” Johan said. “It seems demigod brains are almost mythic-like in their complexity! But perhaps your dreams are not glimpses of actual events, or omens, or voices of enemies taunting you.”

“No,” Hazel said. “For demigods, they are.”

Johan’s entire chest transformed in an expression of wonder. “I should be writing this down. This is groundbreaking!”

“Tell them about the warnings,” Asterion urged.

Johan looked around nervously, as if spies might be eavesdropping. “Ever since we began our climb from Tartarus, we have been hearing a voice in our dreams—a man’s voice, issuing dire threats.”

Nico’s mouth felt dry. “Does this voice say you’ll be judged? Found guilty?”

Everyone at the table stared at him.

“How did you know that?” Johan asked.

“I’m curious too,” said Will, a hint of reprimand in his voice.

“I’ve had similar dreams,” Nico admitted. “Ever since I got here. I didn’t think…Well, I didn’t know what to make of them, so I haven’t mentioned them. Also, we’ve been kind of busy.”

Asterion grunted. “I suppose we did not mention them for much the same reason. In our dreams, it is difficult to know what is real and what is”—he searched for the right word—“noise.”

Hazel looked troubled. “But if you’re all having similar dreams…”

“That’s what I said!” Johan leaned forward until his sternum-nose touched the table. “I’ve been doing some reading. There’s a remarkable bookstore in New Rome run by a Cyclops and a harpy—lovely people! Anyway, I found some old stories, accounts of something like this happening before to other mythics.”

Asterion placed his meaty fists on the tabletop. He lowered his voice. “When we first met, Nico, I told you there had been rare exceptions among the denizens of Tartarus before—mythics who did not want to be monsters.”

“Exactly,” said Johan. “And it appears that things did not end well for them.”

“What does that mean?” Frank asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Johan. “They were *judged*. Punished. Never seen again.”

Nico suddenly felt as cold as his hamburger. “Who would do that? Whose voice are we hearing?”

Johan shrugged, which looked very strange on a guy with no head. “Honestly, Nico di Angelo, my first thought was your father. Pluto—er, Hades—is the king of the Underworld.”

“No,” Nico said. “I know Hades’s voice. I know the way he works. This isn’t him.”

“Agreed,” Hazel said. “Could it have been another god or Titan? Lots of possibilities down in Tartarus.”

Nico and Will locked eyes. They’d had plenty of firsthand experience with cranky primordials in the abyss. But that didn’t feel like the right answer to Nico.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

Johan turned up his palms. “Well, we don’t *know* that someone is hunting us. This voice could be some sort of echo from Tartarus itself, warning us to return home. And who knows what happened to those previous mythics who tried to flee? Even with the Mist hiding our presence, the mortal world will never be safe for us.”

“But…” Asterion left that thought unfinished.

“But the voice has become harsher,” Johan said. “More insistent the longer we stay in the upper world. The dreams have been worst for Arielle and Semele. I don’t know why. The last one Semele had…the voice warned her that she should come out from Camp Jupiter and surrender. If she didn’t do so willingly…she would be forced.”

Frank’s expression hardened. “That settles it.”

Asterion lowered his snout. “If you wish us to leave, we shall.”

“What? No!” Frank slapped the table. “You have to stay. Until we figure out what’s going on, we need to keep you safe. You’re guests of the legion. *Nobody* threatens our guests!”

Hazel put her hand on Frank’s. “I agree.”

Asterion’s shoulder muscles unknotted. “Again, we are in your debt. Orcus will be especially relieved. He enjoyed making friends today with those two sentries.”

“And I still have *lots* of filing to do in the archives!” Johan added.

Nico couldn’t help but smile. Maybe it wasn’t much of a victory. The challenge of settling the mythics at Camp Jupiter seemed more difficult and dangerous than ever. But he felt a little hope, both at Johan’s excitement and at Frank’s epiphany.

“A lot to think about,” said Hazel. “Maybe we should sleep on it and pick up this conversation tomorrow?”

“Agreed,” said Asterion. “And thank you, Praetors. I am honored to call you my friends.”

With that, he and Johan left the mess hall, ignoring the frowns and muttered comments from the legionnaires.

Will pressed his fingers against his temples. “Remember when we thought this was only going to take a couple of days?”

Nico chuckled. “Yeah. Good job, Hazel. This somehow feels harder than an actual quest.”

She smiled sheepishly. “I definitely know how to pick ’em.”

“Hey.” Frank leaned over and kissed her cheek. “We’re learning—*I’m* learning. And we know that the right choice is never easy.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate you saying that.”

The two couples finished their meal with no more talk about mythics or threatening nightmares. Nico tried to hold on to that glimmer of hopefulness.

We’re going to figure this out, he told himself. He just wished he could make himself believe it.

That night, he had another dream. He was sitting in a cold metal chair in the middle of a dark room. The only exit was a closed door just in front of him. Light seeped in around its edges. The shadows of two feet shifted restlessly across the threshold. Someone—or some*thing*—knocked.

Nico wanted to answer, if only to confront his fears. But he couldn’t stand. Couldn’t even speak. The most horrible feeling filled him: this was the final moment of his life. As the son of Hades, he could sense death. *That* was what waited for him on the other side of the door: his final judgment.

The knob rattled. Nico braced himself. The knocking became more insistent. Something heavy banged against the door….

Nico woke with a start. His Cocoa Puffs were cuddled around him in his bunk, but they’d woken up too, their glowing white eyes like polka dots in the darkness.

The door of the guest barracks swung open. Standing there, silhouetted in the moonlight, was Hazel, still in her sleep bonnet.

“Nico, Will.” Her voice trembled with emotion. “Get dressed. Arielle is missing.”

Nico was thankful he’d grabbed his bomber jacket. The predawn air was cold and damp. On their way across the Field of Mars, Hazel deflected their questions with “I don’t know” and “Asterion will explain.” The Puffs bounced along excitedly behind Nico, perhaps wondering where they were going and whether there would be new emotions to play with.

When they arrived at the mythics’ quarters, they found the whole group standing outside on the porch in various states of undress. Asterion wore a blue knit sleeping gown that must have required the wool of an entire sheep’s herd.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “I sent Semele to wake Hazel as soon as I realized Arielle wasn’t here.”

“What happened?” asked Nico, his nerves still jangling from his nightmare. “Where could she have gone?”

Quinoa crossed his pudgy little arms. “If we knew that, genius, we wouldn’t have raised the alarm, and we wouldn’t be standing out here in our pajamas!”

The karpos’s loincloth looked no different than usual, but Nico decided that wasn’t the most important matter at hand.

“Okay,” Will said. “Could she just be, I don’t know, taking a walk? Trying to clear her head?”

Orcus squawked. He wore the world’s tiniest nightcap, which under different circumstances would have made Nico pass out from cuteness overload.

“A walk?” The griffin practically spat the words at him. “One does not simply *walk* through the Field of Mars at four in the morning! It’s a literal minefield!”

“Please, Orcus,” said Johan. Strapped across the top of his shoulders was a sleeping mask that looked like a giant bra. “I know we are on edge, but yelling at each other isn’t polite.”

The griffin glared at the blemmyae. “I’m going to fly another circle around the valley. Just to be sure.”

Before Nico could remind him about the dangers of highways, Orcus launched himself into the dark sky.

Hazel scanned the fields, as if she might be able to make Arielle show herself just by concentrating hard enough. “Frank is organizing search groups. We’ll sweep the camp and the city, but it’s a big area.”

Nico grimaced. If the legionnaires disliked the mythics before, they weren’t going to love getting up even earlier than usual to search for the missing empousa.

“What if she chose to leave, like she’s been threatening to do?” Nico hated asking, but he had to. “I mean, after yesterday, I wouldn’t blame her.”

Asterion’s nostrils flared. “I do not believe she was in any condition to leave. Her wounded arm was in a sling. She was listless and depressed. She had not eaten in several days.”

“Besides,” Johan said, “I made her a nice cup of herbal tea to help her relax. She was the first one of us to fall asleep. And all her things are still in her room.”

Quinoa grunted. “Not that she has a lot of things. Mostly just stuff Asterion knitted for her.”

Asterion nodded. “Surely she would have taken the ‘I Luv Demigods’ sweater.”

Nico’s head spun. It wasn’t unheard of for people to disappear from a demigod camp. Nico had heard stories of similar occurrences at Camp Half-Blood a few years ago. But something wasn’t adding up. He felt like he was back in his nightmare. Someone was knocking insistently on the door, trying to get in, but he couldn’t reach the knob.

Right next to him, Semele said, “What if someone took her?”

The eidolon’s voice nearly gave Nico a coronary. Once he knew where to look, he could discern the telltale signs of gray smoke, but Julius Caesar! He wondered if smoke could be spray-painted, maybe neon orange.

“You mean whoever has been speaking in your dreams?” he asked.

“Perhaps.” Semele sounded both angry and weary. “Although it’s clear some of you demigods hate Arielle and her kind.” She paused. “*Our* kind. Is it so unbelievable that someone could have taken revenge on her?”

None of the demigods had an immediate response. Nico didn’t want Semele to be right. Would anyone in Camp Jupiter actually do that?

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Hazel. “I’ll go into the city and talk to Terminus.” She glanced at Will. “He’s the Roman god of boundaries. If anyone knows whether Arielle left the valley, he will. Meet you back at the mess hall for breakfast?”

Nico watched as she trudged away. He felt terrible for her, knowing she’d soon have to make an announcement to the whole legion, and if she didn’t have any hard information to share, the legionnaires would jump to more wild conclusions.

Meanwhile, Will did his best to console the other mythics. He assured them Arielle would be found.

“I hope you are right,” said Asterion. “I do not think a demigod harmed Arielle. I cannot believe she was taken by a dream voice. But we will stay in our quarters today, just to be safe.”

“Hey!” Quinoa protested. “I got an audition with the New Rome kindergarten today. I even made pots of dirt and seedlings for the kids! I ain’t missing my big chance!”

“Besides,” Semele said bitterly, “staying in our quarters won’t keep us safe. Arielle was *taken* from our quarters. We need to leave this place.”

“We will discuss this in private,” Asterion commanded, his voice gruff. “Come, all of you. Inside.”

Once the mythics were gone, Nico surveyed the Field of Mars. Gray light was just giving definition to the surrounding hills.

A feeling of danger needled his skin.

He sensed that someone was watching him. Not Semele…something more powerful—larger, more malicious. The last time he’d felt this was back in Tartarus, in the presence of Nyx. He glanced down at his Puffs, who also seemed agitated. They huddled around his ankles, pushing and shoving to get closer to Nico.

“What is it?” Will asked.

“I’m not sure,” Nico admitted. “Let’s get back to camp. I want to check on Savannah.”

CHAPTER 14

News of Arielle's disappearance spread fast through Camp Jupiter. To Nico's irritation, most of the legionnaires reacted with a shrug, or even worse, made jokes about it. Nobody seemed terribly concerned. Along the Via Praetoria, Nico heard bits and pieces of conversations like: "It was bound to happen." "Good riddance." "Maybe we should smack the rest of them with practice swords."

Only Lavinia's Fifth Cohort seemed to take the disappearance seriously. With Frank's permission, they had mobilized to search for the empousa, but even this became the subject of wisecracks: "Losers looking for losers. Lavinia and the vampire would make cute tap-dancing partners, wouldn't they?"

It was all Nico could do to control his rage and not summon an army of skeletons to kick some Roman posteriors.

He found the Second Cohort on the Via Principalis. Savannah was lined up with the rest of the group, running pre-breakfast spear drills like on any other day. Centurion Maurice didn't look thrilled when Nico asked to borrow her for a few minutes. Nico insisted it was important.

"Whatever," Maurice said. "Just don't upset her again. She's been through enough."

Nico led Savannah to the porch of the guest barracks. They sat together on the steps as the sun rose a baleful red over the eastern hills. The Puffs, who were both sleepy and smart, took this opportunity to scamper back inside and catch some more z's in Nico's bunk.

Without preamble, Savannah said, "I had nothing to do with it."

She sounded sad rather than defensive. Her red hair was gathered back in a messy bun. Her armor was well polished, as per regulation, but her hands and jeans were speckled with gray flecks that looked like dried clay. From one wrist dangled a glazed blue stone pendant on a twisted rope bracelet. Nico realized he'd seen other Roman demigods with those. Had Frank been wearing one? Hazel? He'd been too busy to pay much attention.

He waited for Savannah to say more. He didn't believe she had the ability to abduct an empousa from her room in the middle of the night. On the other hand, Savannah had wounded Arielle badly. She'd made the empousa a pariah at camp. Her personal tragedy didn't excuse those things, and Nico didn't trust himself to respond.

Savannah scraped a fleck of clay off her knee. “Yes, I wanted her gone. I…I’m glad she’s gone.” She scowled at Nico, daring him to object. “Monsters should not *be* here.”

Nico stayed silent for a count of ten.

“*But*…?” he prompted.

“But I shouldn’t have attacked her,” Savannah said. “I know she’s not the empousa who killed my parents. She didn’t deserve the way I treated her.”

That was something. Nico’s desire to yell at Savannah subsided. *I’m an elder demigod*, he reminded himself. *It’s my job to guide others.*

“Would you be willing to tell me what happened?” he asked gently. “With your parents?”

Savannah shivered. “Have you heard of the Daemones Ceramici?”

It took Nico a moment to translate the Latin. “Pottery demons? I think I heard a story at Camp Half-Blood once.” He gestured to Savannah’s gray-streaked hands. “You’re a potter, I take it.”

She nodded glumly. “Every morning. First thing.”

Nico understood how much dedication that would take. *First thing* at Camp Jupiter meant Savannah would have to get up every morning around three or four.

“I’m a legacy demigod,” she continued. “My grandmother was a child of Minerva, patron of ceramic arts. She was so talented.”

She gazed at nothing, clearly lost in memories. “We always kept a little statue of Minerva on the kiln in the workshop. It’s an old custom with potters. When you fire your pots, it’s supposed to protect them from the ceramic demons that want to break your pieces or destroy them in the flames.”

Nico’s stomach felt heavy. He thought he knew where this story was going. It was similar to other demigod tragedies…including his own.

“My mom and dad made all kinds of art together,” Savannah continued. “But my mom’s speciality was magic containers. Things that could entrap bad spirits.”

“Like empousai,” Nico guessed.

“Yeah…the empousai didn’t like that. I don’t know how they found us. One day they broke into the workshop while the kiln was firing a new batch of vases. My mom and dad and I were working, and…the demons broke the kiln god. They unleashed the Daemones Ceramici.”

Her green eyes shone with rage. “Do you have any idea how hot a kiln fire gets? The empousai weren’t bothered by the flames. They pushed me outside, saying, ‘Learn a lesson from this, girl.’ I couldn’t fight them. I—I wasn’t strong enough. They barricaded my parents inside, and…”

She didn’t need to finish.

“I’m sorry,” Nico said. “My mother died in a fire, too.”

He told her the story. Even after so many years, his voice broke when he talked about the wrath of Zeus; the way a single thunderbolt had left Bianca and him orphaned.

“I guess if I could whack Zeus with a practice sword,” Nico said, “I probably would.”

Savannah wiped away a tear. “That wouldn’t go well.”

“No,” Nico agreed.

They sat listening to Centurion Maurice barking out commands: *“Pila tollite! Ad pila portate!”*

“What can I do?” Savannah asked.

Nico studied her face. She seemed serious about wanting to help.

“You could start by telling people what you told me,” he suggested. “That you know Arielle wasn’t responsible for your parents’ death. That you were upset, understandably, but you were wrong to attack her.”

Savannah grimaced. “I guess that’s fair. I’ll send an Iris-message around.” She tapped the blue pendant on her bracelet.

“What is that, anyway?” Nico asked.

Savannah slipped off the bracelet and handed it to Nico for a closer look. “A tessera—a tile from a mosaic.”

Nico turned the pendant between his fingers. It wasn’t stone, he realized, but layers of colored glass fused into a single square that glimmered and flashed in the sunrise.

He remembered asking Hazel about those high-definition Iris-messages. She’d said something about tesserae. “How does it work?” he asked. “No water, or rainbow, or golden drachma offering?”

Savannah smiled. She seemed relieved to talk about something she actually enjoyed. “Each piece has an underlayer of Imperial gold. I fired them in a kiln and then constructed all of them into a mosaic of the goddess Iris, right? Once the mosaic was consecrated at her temple, I broke down the pieces and handed them out to people in the legion, starting with the praetors and

centurions, obviously. You just tap the tessera and speak the name of the person you want to talk to. Iris does the rest. You can even talk to multiple people at once, like a group chat."

Nico tried to digest that information, and how much easier it would make demigod communication. "You *invented* this?"

Savannah shrugged. "You don't have to sound so surprised. I'm a legacy of Minerva. I don't have enough tesserae for everyone in the legion, but yeah…they're pretty helpful."

Nico thought that was an understatement. Before he could ask any follow-up questions—like *Can I have one?*—the horn sounded for breakfast.

"Thanks for listening," Savannah said, taking back her bracelet. "And…not hating me."

She jogged off to rejoin the Second Cohort, leaving Nico with a lot to think about. If nothing else, maybe he had set an example for not hating. He felt like he deserved some breakfast tacos for that.

At the officers' table, Nico brought Will, Hazel, and Frank up to speed on all the news, including his conversation with Savannah.

Will leaned over and gave him a kiss. "You did a good job. Mr. D would be proud."

Nico wasn't sure about that. Listening and empathizing were hard. If he were Dionysus, he would've been sorely tempted to sic an army of drunken leopards on everyone who annoyed him. He appreciated the kiss, though, even if Will's breath smelled like pico de gallo.

"Maybe she can help quash some of the rumors, at least," Nico said. "Any news from the searches?"

Frank forked scrambled eggs into a tortilla. "Nothing. Orcus flew around the valley until his wings gave out. He says he can spot a mouse from two hundred feet in the air, but he saw no sign of Arielle. The search teams on the ground also came up empty."

"Terminus wasn't much help, either," Hazel reported. "He didn't sense any incursions last night, or any mythics leaving our borders. But he's not infallible."

Will took a bite of migas. "This Terminus guy—"

“He’s a statue with no arms,” Hazel explained, “who is also a minor god.”

“Okay…” Will said this in a way that indicated he had heard of weirder security systems. “And he protects you all, kind of like the Golden Fleece at Camp Half-Blood?”

“Kind of,” Frank said. “But he can’t be everywhere at once. If an army marched up to our borders, yeah, he would sense that. But one person sneaking in or out, whether it was a monster or something else…maybe, maybe not.”

Nico frowned. His bacon-and-egg tacos were excellent, but he found it hard to enjoy them. “What do we do now?”

“The best we can,” Frank said. “Keep looking. Hope for the best.”

Nico glanced around the mess hall. The atmosphere seemed calmer at the moment, at least, but Nico wasn’t sure if that was a sign of improvement. The legionnaires might just be relieved that the mythics were sequestered in their quarters.

He looked at Will. “I wonder if this is how Chiron feels—sitting helplessly at the head table, trying to look calm and collected, hoping the campers can solve their own problems without killing each other.”

“Are we becoming the adults?” Hazel wondered.

Nico shuddered. “Don’t ever say that to me again.”

Hazel gave him a rueful smile. “Yeah. It’s a horrifying thought.”

“Quests and battles are easy,” Nico said. “This”—he swept his arm toward the rest of the room—“this *responsibility* is exhausting. Constantly having to make decisions that are going to impact a bunch of other people, you know?”

“I am familiar,” Frank grumbled.

Hazel dipped a chip in her guacamole. “I didn’t think *any* of this would happen when I took in Asterion and his friends. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but…gods.”

“And we started it,” Nico said, putting his hand on Will’s. “Unknowingly, when we went to Tartarus. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around that.”

“We’re going to figure it out,” Will promised.

His optimism was such a superpower that Nico felt reassured. He remembered sheltering with Will in Tartarus, holding on to him in that dark, poisonous landscape, and being certain that they would survive, because *Will* was certain. Their relationship had only gotten stronger since then.

Even if there was no end to this race, like Mr. D had said, Nico had the best partner at his side. That had to be enough.

“You’re right,” he decided. “So we just keep searching?”

“Leave that to me,” said Frank. “I’ll do a sweep with the Second Cohort. I think it’s important to keep a normal schedule going for the rest of the legion as much as possible. Let them see we’re working on the problem, but we’re also not freaking out.” He smiled at Will and Nico. “That means *you*, my friends, need to get back to training with the Fifth Cohort.”

“Aw, Dad,” Will complained.

Hazel laughed, which made Nico feel a little better.

He was glad to have a plan, even if that plan was *wait and see*. Maybe by tomorrow, things would work themselves out. That had to happen occasionally, right?

Nico threw himself into the *wait and see* plan a little too strenuously.

He and Will worked with the Fifth Cohort for the rest of the day. They marched six miles with full armor and weapons. They did an hour of line dancing. They cleaned the elephant poop from Hannibal’s enclosure.

During archery practice, Will even hit the target multiple times, which, for the bow-challenged son of Apollo, was a pretty big deal.

Nico raised his palm in the air. “Proud of you, sunshine.”

His boyfriend gave him a high five. “Thank you. Now if I can learn to hit a moving target someday, I’ll feel accomplished.”

By dinner there was still no word about Arielle. Hazel suggested they try to get some sleep. Since they’d had very little the night before, and since they were exhausted from a full day on Lavinia Time, Nico didn’t argue.

“We *are* going to figure this out, aren’t we?” he asked Will as they left the mess hall.

“Absolutely,” said Will. “Do I currently know how? Absolutely not.”

Nico went to sleep hoping for the best.

So, of course, he got the worst.

His dream was the same: the dark room, the insistent knocking on the door, the inability to move as he sat in the cold metal chair. But this time, the voice was back.

You were warned, it said. *Now the trials begin. WE FIND YOU IN CONTEMPT.*

A sharp pain radiated from his chest, like knives digging into his heart. He started awake and found a pair of yellow eyes peering down at him. The thing's claws pierced his shirt.

Before he could come to his senses enough to defend himself, the intruder squawked in a familiar voice, "Nico! Get up!"

The miniature griffin Orcus was sitting on his chest.

"Orcus," Nico said groggily. "What's going on? What time is it?"

"Nearly dawn." The griffin's voice trembled with barely controlled rage. "Quinoa is missing. You're needed in the principia."

Hazel and Frank were waiting for them.

Orcus was the only mythic in attendance, but Johan the blemmyae must have been hard at work since Nico's last visit. The shelves along the south wall were now impeccably organized. Rows of leather-bound books were sorted by subject and title—records of camp activities, camper profiles and attendance, the journals of past praetors over the centuries.

It clearly impressed Will, who drifted over to the shelves and ran his fingers along the gold-embossed spines. Nico gently pulled him back toward the praetors' desk.

"What?" Will said. "Don't you want to read them all?"

"Focus," Nico whispered.

Hazel and Frank spread a large map of Camp Jupiter across the desk as Orcus paced along the edge, farting in agitation.

"Okay," Hazel said. "Here's what we know."

She picked up a gold figurine of a Roman soldier. “Let’s say this is Arielle.”

“It doesn’t look like Arielle,” Orcus muttered.

“She was last seen in the mythics’ quarters here.” Hazel placed the figurine at the north end of the Field of Mars.

Frank picked up a second gold soldier. “This is Quinoa. He refused to stay in his quarters yesterday. Apparently had a big fight with Asterion.”

Orcus ruffled his feathers. “Quinoa wanted to work with the kinder-gardeners. Is that so terrible?”

“We know he got into New Rome safely.” Frank moved the figurine across the map from the Field of Mars to the city. “The kindergarten teacher told me he did an incredible job. The kids loved him. They wanted the, uh, ‘angry green baby’ to teach them every day.”

Nico felt a sense of dread building in the pit of his stomach. “And then?”

“Quinoa stayed at the school until nightfall, when the last of the kids was picked up from after-school care. He helped clean the classrooms. He was basically a perfect assistant. Magistra Camilla said she would welcome him anytime. Quinoa left and started walking back to his quarters.”

Frank moved the figurine toward the edge of the city but stopped after only a few inches. He set down the figurine and knocked it sideways. “Terminus never sensed him cross the Pomerian line.”

“Wait,” Will interrupted. “You have a line of Pomeranian dogs?”

“No, it’s…” Frank pinched the bridge of his nose, probably forcing back a headache. “It’s the city limits. The Pomerian line is like an interior magic defensive border. Only protects the city, so it’s a lot smaller than the barrier around the whole valley—more secure and easier to monitor. Anyway, Terminus was on the lookout for Quinoa to leave town, because he, uh, didn’t trust the karpos.”

He glanced apologetically at Orcus.

Orcus’s only protest was another fart. Apparently, he’d been eating citrus.

“Quinoa disappeared,” Hazel concluded. “Terminus alerted us around ten last night when he realized the karpos hadn’t left. He scanned the city himself. Nothing. We spent the night searching door to door. Nothing. Quinoa was just…gone.”

The praetors had obviously gotten no sleep. Frank's eyes looked red and puffy. Hazel's hair was once again tucked into a sleep bonnet, like she'd just been about to turn in when she got Terminus's message. The cap was hand-knit silk-lined purple wool, no doubt a gift from Asterion. Nico found that both sweet and heartbreaking, given everything that had happened.

He turned to Orcus. "Where are the other mythics?"

"At our quarters." The griffin's tone was mildly disgusted. "Asterion insisted we hunker down and wait for you all to come up with a plan. As if we're safe *anywhere*. If Quinoa was taken, too…"

Orcus made a sound somewhere between a cat's mew and a bird's chirp. Nico suspected it was the griffin version of a sob.

"I know," he sympathized. "We're going to find them."

"How?" Orcus demanded.

Nico scanned the other demigods' faces. They looked just as lost as he felt.

"We can't be sure they were taken," Frank said tentatively. "I know Arielle and Quinoa were close. Is it possible Quinoa went to look for her?"

Hazel shook her head. "He couldn't have gotten past the Pomerian line, not with Terminus keeping tabs on him."

"But if something *took* him," Frank countered, "that means it got *inside* the line to do it, without Terminus sensing it or being able to stop it."

Hazel shivered. "In which case, even our strongest defenses are useless. What could do that?"

Nico remembered the feeling he'd had the night before—like something large and powerful was watching him, something none of them could see.

He studied the map, the two gold figurines. The setup reminded him of the Mythomagic games he used to play with Henry when he was younger. He wished he could simply turn over a card or roll a die to solve this problem….

Then he recalled one of Henry's favorite trap cards: the Trojan Horse.

He picked up four more figurines and placed them next to Arielle in the mythics' quarters. "Let's say these are the other mythics: Asterion, Semele, Johan, Orcus."

"We *all* look like legionnaires now," Orcus muttered. "This is clear discrimination."

"Bear with me," Nico pleaded. "I think you're right, Orcus. No place is safe…."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Oh!” Will said, a glimmer of understanding in his eyes. He picked up a few more figurines, placing them in a defensive ring around the mythics. “Like this?”

Nico loved it when he and his boyfriend got on the same wavelength, which seemed to happen more and more frequently these days.

“But hidden,” Nico agreed. “And we wait for tonight. So far, the disappearances have only happened at night.”

Will nodded. “Which means we’ll need to get some sleep today, while we can.”

Frank frowned at the map. “Don’t get me wrong. I’d welcome an excuse to take a day and catch up on my sleep. But I don’t understand—”

“I get it,” Hazel said suddenly. “But how?”

“We’ll need Savannah’s help,” Nico said. “And anyone you’ve got who can operate well at night.”

“Hold on!” Orcus demanded. “Does somebody want to explain this plan to me?”

The griffin looked at Nico with desperate hope. Nico remembered how he had felt yesterday, holding the trembling little guy in his arms after rescuing him from the highway. He *had* to make this work.

“I can only promise you one thing,” he told Orcus. “You’re going to hate it.”

At sunset, Asterion and his friends gathered outside the mythics' quarters. They had dressed for bed, though no one expected to get any sleep tonight. Orcus wore his tiny nightcap, while Asterion had donned a handmade blue sleeping gown. Semele…well, she was smoke.

Johan wore briefs and a bathrobe, open at the chest so he could see. His large pectoral eyes shifted from side to side, so his whole midsection looked like the face of a paranoid neighbor peeking out from between terry-cloth curtains. Nico couldn't blame Johan for feeling afraid. In his position, Nico would've felt the same way.

He instinctively looked down, expecting to see Fear hugging his ankle, but no. The Puffs were likely fast asleep in the guest barracks. Nico wondered if the cacodemons were linked somehow to his own exhaustion. That might explain why they'd been sleeping so much the past few days. Or it simply could have been all the physical activity and shadow-travel.

The thought of how much Nico had done in such a short span of time made him tired all over again.

Will went over the plan once more with the mythics. Usually when he overexplained like this—telling everyone not to be nervous, assuring them that the plan would work—it meant he himself was nervous and unsure the plan would work. But Nico didn't judge. He appreciated the calming sound of his boyfriend's voice.

"Nico and I will be roving," he said. "He'll shadow-travel us wherever we're needed. Frank's going to be directing operations from the principia. The Second and Fifth Cohorts have deployed groups of sentries along the boundaries of camp. Terminus will be on speed dial. If anyone detects anything, he'll personally check it out and go 'minor god' on any intruders. Don't worry. We are going to find out how your friends disappeared."

"Disappeared." Semele added a hint of disgust to the word. "That's a funny way to describe what happened. Our friends were *stolen*."

"Maybe so," said Nico. "But if the mythic-napper tries again tonight, this whole plan is designed to catch them."

Asterion studied the tessera that now hung from his wrist. Savannah had spent the day collecting, modifying, and redistributing every bracelet in camp. Now each mythic had one (except Semele, who couldn't handle physical objects) and so did at least one person in every

sentry group. Nico wasn't sure how Savannah had done it, but she'd managed to turn the brightness down to zero so the Iris-messages conveyed voices only—because it would be a little hard to run night surveillance and catch an intruder if the sentries were communicating with giant glowing rainbow spheres.

"We just whisper into it?" Asterion asked.

Will nodded. "All the tesserae will be linked in one big Iris-network. Don't speak into it unless you absolutely need to, but you should be able to hear anything going on at any location."

"Ingenious," Johan said.

Will smiled. "Occasionally, my boyfriend has a brilliant idea."

There was no reason for Nico to blush. He blushed anyway.

Orcus flapped his wings. "So while you're roving around, who's here protecting us?"

"Here they come now." Nico gestured across the field, where Hazel was marching toward them with Yazan and a goat-legged guy with the unlikely name Maynard Thee Faun.

Semele hissed like steam from a kettle. "And they'll *actually* protect us?"

Heat rose to Nico's face again. He wanted to yell, *That's Hazel! Do you know how much she's done for you?*

"Of course," he said instead. "But I understand why you're asking."

"Then you'll understand why I don't trust mortal guards." She fumed, literally, and drifted into the house.

"Please excuse her," said Asterion. "She is the oldest among us and has the most reason to hate the upper world. She is trying, but her journey is her own. I cannot ask her to speed it up."

"I don't take it personally," Nico said, though he wondered what had left Semele so bitter. If she was older than the legend of the Minotaur…that was *old*.

"Are we going to be safe?" asked Orcus.

"As safe as we can make you," Hazel said, joining the group. "You already know Yazan. He's a child of Vesper, the god of dusk."

"Nighttime is the right time," Yazan said with a grin. "Nobody is going to sneak past me in the dark."

"And this is Maynard Thee Faun, who is…well, a faun, obviously," Hazel continued. "He's our best tracker."

Maynard flashed the mythics a peace sign. He wore night-vision goggles and a tie-dye T-shirt in camouflage colors. " 'Sup, dudes," he said. "When it comes to tracking, I'm like *the* dude, dudes."

"And of course Hazel," Nico added, "who's the best in camp when it comes to manipulating the Mist."

"The three of us will be inside with you all night," Hazel said. "Hidden, of course. Centurion Lavinia will be outside with three of her best people, hunkering down in covered foxholes."

Orcus farted. "I am glad Yazan is here."

"Me, too, little guy," said the legionnaire. "Nobody's going to steal my buddy."

"We appreciate you all," Asterion said. "I am just sorry it has come to this."

"Ditto," said Nico. "All of you belong here."

"No, we don't!" Semele cried out from inside.

Asterion rolled his eyes. "Whatever happens, I thank you, demigods." He gathered Hazel and Nico into a tender hug. He smelled of wool and cowhide…not unpleasant odors at all. Sheltered in his massive arms, Nico felt safe and cared for, but also sad. If this huge and powerful mythic couldn't protect his companions, what hope did Nico have?

"You have done everything you could for us," the bull-man said. "I am honored to have you as friends."

A lump formed in Nico's throat. Asterion released him and led the others inside. From the threshold, Hazel glanced back at Nico one last time and mouthed *Good luck*. Then she closed the door behind her.

Will and Nico stood alone on the porch.

"I hate this," said Nico. "The whole situation makes me feel *bad*."

"I know," said Will. "It's bringing out the paranoia in everyone."

"Yeah, that's part of it." Nico watched the sunset turn to dark purple over the western hills. "There's more going on, though, and I can't piece it together."

"Then it's a good thing you're not doing this alone." Will smiled, hefting his backpack of endless supplies. "And I've got Kit Kats."

Nico's heart fluttered. A couple of years ago, he could not have imagined having an actual boyfriend. It hadn't even been a *dream* of his. He'd never dared to think that someone would

stick with him through so many experiences like this. And yet here that someone was, ready to accompany him on every twist and turn of his journey.

It was going to be a long, nerve-racking night. But in that moment, Nico let Will be the balm to his scattered soul. The promise of Kit Kats didn't hurt, either.

Around midnight, a terrible, chilly wind whipped through the Berkeley Hills. Nico was grateful for his thick wool beanie—a gift from Asterion. In an upsetting turn of events, Will had actually had to change into *pants*. They were cargo pants, of course, and Nico was sure they were stuffed to the gills with first aid supplies, snacks, hand warmers, and whatever else Will thought they might need in the next four hundred years. (That boy was prepared for *anything*.) Nevertheless, Will seemed uncomfortable in full-length trousers, as if he was worried the Surfer Boy Vibe Police might give him a citation for ruining his aesthetic.

When they'd stopped by the guest barracks for warmies, some of the Puffs had decided to join their adventure. Now, as Nico and Will stood with the forward sentries above the Caldecott Tunnel, the Puffs bounced around Will's feet, looking up at him with their demonic puppy-dog eyes, probably hoping he'd drop some food they could gobble up. The Puffs were smart. They knew Will was the guy with the snacks. Nico wondered if he should train them not to beg, but he decided it would be way funnier if he didn't.

Deion and Savannah were on duty at the tunnel entrance. It was a pretty miserable assignment on a blustery winter night, but both had volunteered. Nico doubted any intruder would march right up to the main entrance of camp, but he appreciated that the two demigods wanted to help.

Savannah in particular had been indispensable. She'd spent much of her watch talking over the Iris-network with teams who were having trouble, offering tessera tech support. "No, you don't have to shout." "Yes, just whisper the name." "No, please don't 'reply all.' " "Have you tried taking the bracelet off and putting it back on again?"

"That's gotta be overwhelming," Nico observed when she finished a service call.

Savannah smirked. "It's fine. Better once I figured out how to mute and hold messages so I'm not overhearing everyone's conversations at once."

“Smart,” said Will. He poured her more hot chocolate (with marshmallows, naturally) from his thermos. Nico knew he and Will should probably shadow-travel elsewhere and check on the other teams, but he’d been popping around the valley all night. He would have passed out hours ago if not for adrenaline, sugar, and caffeine. Besides, the Caldecott sentries were allowed to keep a fire going in their brazier. Fire was warm.

Deion took off his helmet and tied back his locs. He peered across the lights of the East Bay flats, glittering in the cold like diamonds on black velvet.

“So, what exactly are we watching for?” Deion asked. “I’ve seen zilch.”

“Anything out of the ordinary,” said Will.

“That doesn’t narrow it down.” Savannah squinted at Nico. “Do you really think someone is sneaking into camp and capturing monst—” She caught her choice of words. “Sorry. *Mythics*.”

Nico leaned against the parapet. “We don’t exactly know. But we’ll find out.”

Savannah still looked troubled. The cacodemon Guilt skittered toward her, its long legs making it look like a tarantula wreathed in inky black vapor. It stared up at Savannah as if it recognized a fellow sufferer.

“This isn’t your fault,” Nico told her.

“It kinda feels like it is,” she murmured.

“Come on,” said Deion. “Don’t say that.”

Savannah faced him. “Easy for you to say. You make friends with everybody, even a farting griffin. Me? I had a meltdown. I blamed Arielle for something she didn’t do! I hurt her. I wished she would go away. I wanted them *all* to go away, and now…”

Deion didn’t reply. He just stood beside her, scanning the hillside. Guilt rolled around at her feet, showing off his smoky belly.

“Sorry,” Savannah said softly. “I didn’t mean to take out my problems on you. I seem to be doing that a lot.”

“It’s cool.” Deion gave her a smile. “ ’Least you don’t fart when you’re nervous. As far as I can tell.”

Savannah punched him playfully. Will refilled everybody’s cups, because there was no problem hot chocolate couldn’t make better.

“We all do it,” Will said. “I mean, lash out sometimes. Not fart. Although I guess we all do that, too.”

Nico cleared his throat. “I think what my boyfriend is trying to say, in his fumbling but adorable way, is that we all make mistakes. Will can attest to how many times I’ve said something completely out of line when I’ve been upset.”

“But not like this,” said Savannah. “If something has happened to Arielle…”

Sadness washed over Nico. “You know, I once blamed a really good friend because my sister died. Blamed him for a long time, too.”

He could sense both Deion and Savannah staring at him, but he pushed past his discomfort. He knew he needed to talk about this.

“She died so far away from me. There was nothing I could do about it, but I thought that my friend…I thought he *could* have done something and simply didn’t try hard enough. And I hated him for it.”

Despite the fact that it had been years since Bianca’s death—and only months since the last time he’d spoken with her in the Underworld—Nico’s eyes blurred. He swayed a little.

He turned to the campers with a sorrowful smile. “I’m still grieving. But I realize that I was so angry and afraid, I found the easiest person to blame. I gave him every ounce of my rage and my sadness.”

“And now?” Savannah asked.

Nico shrugged. “It was a process, but we’re friends again. The hardest part was learning to live with *that* little guy.” He pointed to Guilt, which was rolling on its back, legs flailing, just begging for Savannah to scratch its shadowy tummy.

Will gazed at the city below them. “I’ve learned that grief is…weird. I lost a lot of friends in the Battle of Manhattan. One was a sibling—an older brother from the Apollo cabin. I was so furious that he was gone. Then, right after he died, I got the chance to save someone else. Inexplicably, that healed a part of *me*. I think I would have been so much worse off if that hadn’t happened.”

Savannah wiped away a tear. “I guess I haven’t even really had a chance to be sad about my parents. I was with Lupa so soon after they died. Then I came here.”

“And then you saw Arielle.” Deion patted her shoulder. “After what happened to your folks, that would mess up anybody. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. When we find Arielle, you two can talk. I’m sure that will make you both feel better.”

He winked at Nico and Will. “And we will find her, right? You two survived Tartarus. You can do anything.”

“Oh, gods, that’s right.” Savannah sniffled. “Here I am talking about my own problems, and you guys have been through so much worse.”

“Hey,” Nico said, “everyone’s pain is valid. Dionysus told me that, and he should know. He *is* a pain.”

Savannah laughed for the first time Nico had heard. “Still,” she said, “you’re both kind of celebrities.”

Deion nodded. “For real. Everyone is talking about you all time. You must have noticed?”

Nico and Will exchanged a look.

“Is *that* what the legionnaires have been whispering about?” asked Will. “I kind of assumed they were complaining about Asterion and his friends.”

“I mean…okay, that’s most of it,” Deion admitted. “But you two are a big deal!”

Savannah sipped her hot chocolate. “To be fair, we’ll gossip about anything. Don’t you guys do that over in the Greek camp? The boys are *especially* bad.”

“We are not!” said Deion. Then he glanced at Nico and mouthed *We are.*

Nico smiled. It made him feel better to know that not all the whispering and gossiping he’d noticed in the mess hall was about the mythics.

He knew Asterion’s group meant no harm. The bigger problem was getting the legionnaires to believe that. If Deion and even Savannah could learn to be more open-minded, maybe there was a chance, and that could change *everything*.

Bob had done that for Nico. The Titan had chosen to be something different than what he had been destined for at birth. And wasn’t that exactly what Nico had done himself over the past six months?

He’d been known as many things over the years: Death Boy, the Ghost King, Grumpy Little Ball of Darkness. Inherent in all of them: He was different. He was not like anyone else. He certainly had no aversion to being associated with darkness. He loved that part of himself. But sometimes being on the outside was hard. It made it easy for him to empathize with Asterion and his friends, who’d been rejected by their own kind and were now struggling in a world that couldn’t see them as anything but monsters.

Nico wanted to bridge that gap. He wanted to show the Romans and mythics that it was possible to choose something better than fear and mistrust. If Bob could do it, maybe there was hope for the rest of them.

He watched the younger demigods chat while their eyes kept scanning the horizon for any threats, but there was nothing out of the ordinary within sight.

And at that moment, for no reason Nico could see, the Cocoa Puffs went into a frenzy. They raced around him, crashing into one another. Fear and Guilt grabbed on to Nico's bootlaces. Jealousy prodded his ankle with its pointy tusks, flooding his mind with bitter images: *Annabeth reaching for Percy's hand. Sally Jackson speaking fondly about her son while handing out homemade blue cookies*.

The hairs rose on the back of Nico's neck. Jealousy's touch seemed to sharpen his senses. He felt something moving toward them from the west, like a low-pressure zone before a storm.

"Nico?" asked Will. "Why are the Puffs so upset?"

"I sense something," he said. "We're being watched."

Deion frowned. "Are you sure?"

Nico glanced down at the freeway. He didn't see anything, but dread was building in his stomach.

"Hold on," Savannah said, setting down her cup. "Frank's calling."

She raised her bracelet and listened.

The temperature dropped as if Nico had stepped into a freezer. His breath steamed. The Puffs mewled and howled.

Will shivered. "I think you're right. I can feel it now too."

Savannah spoke urgently into her tessera. "Hold on. *What?* Wait, someone else is calling."

Nico raised his own tessera. "Terminus! We need you here *now*."

CRASH! The sound came from Nico's tessera. A split second later, another one echoed from Savannah's pendant. A cacophony of voices shattered the night air. *"Something's here!" "Terminus!" "Hazel!" "Where is it?" "Frank!" "Terminus!"*

Deion gripped his spear, looking around wildly for some invisible foe to fight.

Light exploded from their tesserae. Every Iris-message from every pendant blazed overhead at full brightness, blinding Nico and burning the afterimage of a hundred rainbow spheres onto his eyes.

Just as suddenly, the lights flickered out. From Nico's tessera came a noise like wet breathing into a microphone, followed by a distorted voice.

“What is this shiny toy?” The speaker sounded like an old woman…like La Befana, the Christmas witch from the fables Nico had grown up with. *“Oh, how clever! I think I’ll keep it. And Hazel Levesque…interfering with a duly appointed officer of the court? Tsk, tsk. You shall be next!”*

The voice went silent. The tesserae grew so hot that the demigods had to pull them off and throw them to the ground, where they lay smoking like blown fuses.

“What just happened?” Savannah asked.

Panic constricted Nico’s throat. “Hazel. Hazel’s in trouble!” He grabbed Will’s hand, summoned a hasty mental image of the mythics’ quarters, and pulled his boyfriend into the shadow world.

Nico had never seen a blemmyae cry before.

Johan's large pectoral eyes were red and puffy as he staggered across the front porch. Tears streamed down his rib cage. In his arms, he held the limp form of Hazel.

Nico's heart slammed on the emergency brake. He couldn't move. Couldn't think. Will rushed forward and helped Johan lay Hazel on the porch.

"She's breathing," Will announced.

Nico's muscles unfroze. He ran to his sister's side. She lay motionless, her hair spilling across the whitewashed boards, her face set in a look of mild consternation, like she was having a stress dream.

"Good pulse," Will said, then gently inspected her head. "No contusions. No visible wounds. She's just…unconscious."

"The others," Johan sobbed. "The others are inside."

"I should go check." Will glanced at Nico. "Stay with her?"

He could only nod. Will and Johan disappeared into the mythics' quarters.

Nico cradled Hazel's head in his lap. His nerves felt like the tesserae—hot, overloaded, and fuming. He wasn't sure if he wanted to sob or scream. His Cocoa Puffs, who had shadow-traveled with him, now circled Hazel warily, sniffing her clothes like she smelled of rival cacodemon pheromones.

Hazel's eyes fluttered open. "Wh-what—?"

"I've got you," Nico said in a broken voice. "You're okay. You're okay."

Nico heard shouting and the clanking of armor coming from the direction of Camp Jupiter. Frank Zhang was running toward them at impressive speed, followed by two archers.

Hazel struggled to sit up. "What happened? I—"

“Take it easy,” Nico urged. “Do you remember anything?”

She rubbed the side of her head. “I—I was sitting on the sofa, waiting with Yazan and Maynard. I’d pulled the Mist around us to hide, and then…did I fall asleep?” She straightened. “Is everyone okay?”

Will emerged from the quarters, propping up Yazan, who limped along at his side. Orcus flapped around them, squawking with concern. “Will he be okay? Can I help? Yazan, don’t die!”

“Chill, little buddy,” Yazan said groggily. “I’ll be fine.”

Johan appeared next, with Maynard Thee Faun in his arms. Maynard looked perfectly fine, but he seemed to be enjoying the free ride. He was in the midst of regaling Johan with his adventure of falling asleep on the couch. “And then, dude! I, like, passed out or something! That couch is comfy!”

Last came Semele, her smoky gray form thicker and darker than usual.

Frank and his archers finally reached the porch.

“Hazel!” he gasped.

“I’m okay,” she assured him.

“What happened?” He glanced around at the motley group, like he would accept answers from anyone at this point. “You heard that voice?”

Hazel exchanged a confused look with Yazan and Maynard. “What voice?”

Then, because things weren’t confusing enough, Terminus decided to join the party. With a *BANG!* and a flash, the godly statue appeared in a column of smoke like a low-budget magician.

“NOBODY PANIC!” he announced. “I AM HERE!”

“A little late,” snapped Semele.

The god glowered—which Nico knew was his default expression. From the waist down, Terminus was a rough-hewn block of white marble. From the waist up, he’d been sculpted as a curly-haired, muscular man with no arms. Whenever he moved, he reminded Nico of a magician trying to wrestle their way out of a straitjacket for the gathered crowd.

“Save your criticism, eidolon!” said the god. “I was just summoned to twenty different sentry points at the same time. It’s a miracle I didn’t shatter! Now, where’s the intruder? And please don’t tell me, for the twenty-first time, that there isn’t one!”

“There isn’t one,” said Semele. “At least not anymore. We all passed out—even me, and I didn’t know I *could* pass out.”

“There was a voice,” Frank said. “I think all the other sentries heard it.”

He repeated what the Christmas witch had said over the tesserae.

Johan looked at him blankly. “We did not hear this.”

“Which means the actual intrusion probably happened here,” Terminus said. “And the other sentries were victims of some kind of magical distraction—decoys to keep my attention divided until it was too late.”

Nico shivered. “That presence felt *very* real. If it happened simultaneously, everywhere we had sentries stationed…What kind of being has that kind of power?”

“A minor god, obviously,” said Terminus. “At least a level six. No one else could outmaneuver me this way! When I get my hands on whoever it was…”

Everyone politely ignored the fact that Terminus had no hands. Nico was also pretty sure minor-god power levels weren’t a thing.

“I’ll ask the obvious question,” Terminus continued. “Is everyone accounted for?”

Nico scanned the group. Each person’s face reflected their own shell-shocked expression. Then a collective sense of horror seemed to settle over them as they turned to look at the large empty rocking chair on the porch, and realized who was, in fact, *not* accounted for.

“Asterion!” Nico and Hazel said in unison.

They led a mad rush into the mythics’ quarters.

The bull-man was gone.

His room reminded Nico of a monastic cell—walls of gray sandstone, a hard-packed dirt floor, no windows, no furniture except a straw mattress and a basket of Asterion’s knitting supplies. Asterion had spent so much of his time at Camp Jupiter knitting, yet none of his finished products were here. Apparently, he’d given them all away as soon as they were done.

Nico's heart ached. He realized the room was meant to look like part of the Labyrinth, Asterion's old home and prison. He wondered if the resemblance had brought the bull-man comfort, or if it was simply part of his traumatic history that he couldn't yet shed.

Johan paced the room, wringing his hands and muttering "No, no, no, no."

Semele floated above the mattress, her smoke still thick and roiling.

Orcus let loose a screech of pure misery. His small feline tail whipped back and forth.

"He was seven feet tall!" wailed the griffin. "He weighed as much as one of those car things! How can he just be *gone*?"

Nico had no answer. He could still smell the scent of Asterion's hide, feel the warmth of his last embrace.

"So, do you finally believe us?" demanded Semele. "We are being *taken*!"

"I didn't disbelieve you before," Hazel said, though she didn't seem able to muster much conviction.

"Hmph," said the eidolon. "In any case, we'll be leaving at first light. Orcus, Johan, gather your things."

***"What?"* asked Frank. "Why?"**

"You know exactly why!" snarled Semele. "Someone is kidnapping our *family*, and you are not able to stop it!"

Nico racked his brain. He couldn't let things end like this—with half the mythics taken, the other half fleeing. Asterion wouldn't have wanted that.

He thought about what had happened tonight—the voice from the tesserae, the sensation he'd felt at the Caldecott Tunnel, the way his cacodemons had reacted just beforehand.

He looked down at the Cocoa Puffs, now bouncing around the room as if they sensed nothing amiss….

"One more night," Nico blurted out. "Please, Semele."

"Why should we?"

"Because we're close to cracking what's happening," Nico said. "I know what to do now."

"Bah!" the eidolon scoffed.

"I would like to hear the boy out," said Johan. "*Before* we make a decision."

“Johan,” Semele said, “I know you have a fondness for these demigods, but—”

“Why can’t we just *listen*?” pleaded the blemmyae.

Semele’s smoke turned pale. It dawned on Nico that Johan had actually *interrupted* someone…which seemed impolite. Nico was so proud.

“You forget that *I* am your elder,” Semele said, her voice taut. “I existed hundreds upon hundreds of years before you were even a thought in the universe. If Asterion really is gone, then his authority as leader of this little group passes to me.”

Johan dropped his gaze. “Yes, of course. I apologize…but could we *please* just listen to him? Thank you.”

Orcus flapped his wings. “I agree with my big-faced friend!”

Semele muttered something in a language Nico didn’t recognize. Ancient Minoan? Phoenician? Dead languages could be useful when you wanted to insult someone.

“Very well, Nico di Angelo,” said the eidolon. “Tell us what you know, and we will decide if it is worth the risk of staying here another night.”

Nico glanced at Will, who nodded at him encouragingly.

“My cacodemons,” Nico said. “Just before Asterion’s disappearance, they began to panic. They kept trying to get my attention.”

“I saw it,” confirmed Will. “They’d *never* acted like that before.”

“A moment later,” Nico went on, “I sensed a presence—like something cold and unfriendly, washing over me.”

“Yes, we’re aware an invisible force infiltrated your camp,” Semele said bitterly. “That is not comforting to us.”

“Hold on.” Hazel looked at Nico with newfound interest. “How long was it between when the Puffs sensed the intrusion and when *you* sensed it?”

“Only a few seconds,” Nico admitted. “Still…”

“They could serve as an early warning system,” Hazel said.

“A *what*?” Semele asked.

“That’s kind of brilliant,” Will said. “If this god-level thing comes back tonight, and if we keep the Puffs with us…”

Frank nodded slowly. "Then we'll know when it's about to strike. We can be ready this time."

Semele muttered another curse in ancient whatever-it-was. "I'll remind you that *here*, where the abductor actually struck, we felt nothing."

"But you didn't have the Cocoa Puffs," Nico said.

"Even so, this force was powerful enough to put all of us to sleep, including *me*! None of your lookouts knew what hit them. Why would next time be different?"

Hazel winced, clearly hurt. She'd been working with Asterion since the mythics first arrived. They'd become good friends. Nico imagined the bull-man's disappearance, and her inability to stop it, was tearing her apart inside.

"Speak, Praetor," Semele urged her. "Do you have a solution?"

Hazel took a deep breath. "Maybe so…Nico, you felt that cold presence before the other demigods did?"

"By a few seconds, yeah."

"Were you in physical contact with a Puff at the time?"

Nico remembered Jealousy prodding him with its tusks. "Yep."

Hazel looked like she was running an equation in her head. She faced Semele. "Okay, so…as the daughter of Pluto, one of my abilities—*growing* abilities, I should say—is that I can manipulate the Mist."

"I'm aware," Semele said. "You made yourself and your comrades invisible tonight while you were on watch. It did not help."

"Except it wasn't really invisibility," Hazel said. "That's not how the Mist works."

Johan stopped his pacing. " 'The Mist works more on the mind than the eyes.' I read that in a treatise by Aristides of Pergamon!"

Nico had no idea who that was, but the comment seemed to make sense to Hazel.

"Right," she said. "Usually, the Mist is generated when mortal minds encounter something magical that they can't understand. That…friction, I guess you'd call it, creates alternate perceptions."

Will frowned. "Okay, but…I thought that, as demigods, we see right through the Mist."

“You see through it more *easily*,” Hazel corrected. “But you can still be fooled, especially if someone is actively trying to manipulate you. You’ve encountered plenty of creatures that you didn’t realize were mythical at first, right?”

Will nodded sheepishly. “Point taken.”

Frank leaned against the stone wall. He looked like he was having trouble following Introductory Mist Theory with Hazel Levesque, especially since it was one o’clock in the morning. “Sorry…how does this help us?”

“Whatever is abducting the mythics,” Hazel said, “it has to be using the Mist. To put an entire room full of people asleep, to cause disturbances all around our borders, to kidnap someone as huge as Asterion—and to do all of that at once? Terminus must be right. We’re dealing with something like a minor god.”

“Then it’s hopeless,” Johan said.

“No,” Frank said. “Terminus is a minor god. He’s not perfect.”

Until that moment, Nico had never really appreciated the power of understatement. But Frank had made his point. Everyone in the room nodded and looked thoughtful, as if imagining all the ways that a minor god might fail spectacularly.

“When multiple people are trying to manipulate the Mist,” Hazel said, “it becomes sort of like a poker game. It’s all about bluffing and calling, not necessarily who has the most powerful hand. Tonight, the intruder got the drop on me. I’d created a general illusion that I was blending in with the couch, but even that took a lot of energy. The intruder called my bluff and convinced everyone in the room that they were super tired and needed to pass out. I couldn’t respond because I didn’t know we were being attacked. But maybe if I’d had a Cocoa Puff in my lap…”

“The Puff would have warned you,” Nico said. “And being in contact with one heightens your emotions.”

“Which makes you more aware.” Hazel smiled. “That’s why you felt the intruder’s presence before anyone else did. Altogether, that should be enough warning for me to be prepared this time. At the very least, I can stay awake and put all my energy into revealing this intruder’s true form.”

Frank cracked his knuckles, which seemed like a very son-of-Mars thing to do. “And the rest of us will take them down, even if I have to throw Terminus at them.”

Orcus stomped his front two eagle feet impatiently. “I only understood about ten percent of that. But none of it explains *why* Arielle, Quinoa, and Asterion were taken!”

“One step at a time, child,” said Semele. Her tone had become less irritated, more pensive. She floated closer to Hazel. “We need to figure out *who* before we figure out *why*. Do you really think you can catch whoever has been kidnapping our friends, Praetor Levesque?”

“I do.”

“Using us as bait again,” Semele guessed.

“Not exactly.” Hazel turned toward Nico. “What did the voice in the tesserae say about me?”

The memory gave Nico goose bumps.

“That you would be next,” he said.

Frank grunted. “That’s *not* going to happen. We can wait in the principia’s vault tonight. It’s the most secure location in camp.”

Hazel nodded. “I’d like the mythics to join us there. For safety in numbers. But your people aren’t the target tonight, Semele—*I* am. That gives us the edge. We know who this intruder is coming for, which means we know they will appear wherever I am. We won’t have to spread out trying to guard the whole valley.”

“And if they try to take us on in the middle of Camp Jupiter, surrounded by the entire legion…” Frank bared his teeth.

Nico usually thought of Frank as a big, cuddly teddy bear. He’d forgotten how scary the guy could be when he showed his teddy-bear fangs.

Hazel focused on the gray smoke of the eidolon. “So…will you consider staying?”

Orcus and Johan stood motionless, waiting for Semele’s decision.

“It is dangerous,” she said. “But perhaps no more dangerous than striking out on our own. We will stay one more night.”

Nico exhaled with relief. Johan crouched, offering his hand to Orcus, who gave the blemmyae the tiniest of high fives.

“Now, if it is all right with you,” Semele continued, “we mythics need time to ourselves—to grieve, to rest, to prepare.”

The demigods got the message. They filed out of the mythics’ quarters into the night. On the Field of Mars, Terminus had conjured up several hundred feet of yellow police tape and had created a perimeter around the building.

“This is an active crime scene!” he announced. “No one may leave without my permission!”

“I’m going to bed,” Hazel said, walking past him.

“Okay, fine,” Terminus grumbled. “You can go.”

Will walked up to the nearest line of tape.

“And you, too,” said Terminus.

When Nico smirked at the minor god, he sighed. “And you. You can ALL go, but only because I gave permission.”

As they headed back to camp, the last thing Nico heard was Terminus ordering a very confused Maynard Thee Faun to start dusting the scene for godly fingerprints.

Maybe Frank was right. Minor gods weren’t unbeatable.

Nico put a hand on Hazel’s shoulder. “That was impressive back there. Can we strategize more over breakfast?”

She yawned. “Actually, let’s make it lunchtime. I should get some real, not-Mist-induced sleep.”

“Sleeping late doesn’t sound very Roman,” he noted.

“Zip it, di Angelo.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“And we’re going to *keep* her okay,” Frank vowed. “I just hope you two know what you’re doing. All this cacodemon and Mist talk…” He shook his head. “I’d prefer a straight-up fight.”

“So would I,” Will admitted, “and I *hate* fighting. But one thing I’ve learned about children of the Underworld: they are very resourceful, and they make excellent partners.” He winked at Nico.

“Hmm,” Frank said. “Well, I can’t disagree with that, or Hazel will punch me.”

She laughed and punched him regardless, in the most loving way possible.

“See you at lunch,” she told Nico and Will. “We’ll take it one step at a time, okay?”

She looped her arm through Frank’s and led him toward the principia.

Nico tried to stay positive. He tried not to think about Asterion’s empty room, or their utter failure tonight, or the witch’s voice over the tesserae. She had called herself an officer of the court…but what court? Who was judging, and what were the crimes? Even more worrisome, what were the punishments?

He would have to trust in their plan for tonight. Hazel would be fine. They would get their answers.

***One step at a time*, he repeated to himself. He could do that.**

Nico had no dreams.

He found the silent sleep even more unsettling. When he woke for lunch, he felt like he'd risen from the dead rather than from his bunk—and Nico knew what rising from the dead was like better than most people.

He worried that the lack of voices in his nightmares meant his unknown enemies were done with threats. Now they simply intended to act. He would have preferred to believe that Asterion had overpowered the mythic-nappers. Maybe the bull-man had knocked their heads together, stabbed them with knitting needles, tied them up in yarn, and was now heading home with Arielle and Quinoa. Nico suspected that was too much to hope for.

As Will and Nico traversed the Via Principalis, they found that the mood of the legion had shifted dramatically overnight. They saw no graffiti, no troublemaking or dark glances. They heard no whispered complaints or snide comments about monsters. All five cohorts had turned out in full armor. They hustled through camp, reinforcing the battlements, stockpiling harpoons for the ballistae, preloading catapults, and making sure there was plenty of boiling oil. The Romans really knew how to welcome visitors, and they obviously did *not* like someone threatening one of their praetors.

Outside the First Cohort's barracks, Centurion Terrence was giving his soldiers a pep talk. Standing next to him was Johan and a legionnaire who looked like…Nico had to do a double take. Yes, that was the kid who'd tried to prank Johan and gotten himself frozen with the dodecahedron a few days before. Now he stood with his hand on Johan's shoulder/forehead, nodding along with his centurion's speech like he was serving as a character witness for the blemmyae.

"An unknown intruder came into *our territory*!" Terrence bellowed. "Stole *our* guests from their beds!"

The legionnaires yelled for vengeance, banging their spears against their shields.

"Our honor as hosts, as Romans, as demigods has been tarnished!" Terrence continued. "The mythics deserve better! We will let *no more harm* befall them!"

Legionnaires hooted and shouted in agreement. The former prankster next to Johan raised his fist. "I, Lucius Silver, son of Mercury, pledge my life to protect this blemmyae! He shall not be harmed while I draw breath. Who is with me?"

The entire cohort cheered. Johan looked stunned by the commotion and also moved to tears. He sniffled and wiped his enormous eyes, mumbling his thanks, and made a heart shape with his hands to show the cohort. If the blemmyae had had a throat, Nico imagined there would've been a lump in it.

"That's encouraging," Will observed as they walked on.

Nico nodded. He felt salty that it had taken the disappearance of three mythics and a threat against Hazel to change the legion's mind, but he supposed it was better late than never. He was glad he had Will to remind him of the bright side. Nico tended to daydream about the side where he summoned an army of skeletons to smack a little sense into the Romans. For some reason, Will considered that idea "too dark."

Orcus was enjoying a similar surge in popularity. The tiny griffin held court outside the coffee shop, recounting the story of last night's abduction to an assembly of Lares, wolves, eagles, and fauns. In this version, though, Orcus had fallen asleep valiantly, struggling to keep his eyes open as he crawled toward the unseen intruder, determined to claw their eyes out and save Asterion, but alas, to no avail.

Maynard Thee Faun worked the crowd, holding out a hat for donations for "the defense of New Rome," despite the fact that none of the crowd had pockets or used money.

"Little dude is a hero!" Maynard shouted. "Give it up for Orcus!"

The griffin preened. As far as Nico could tell, he didn't fart once.

Nico and Will had lunch at the officers' table as planned, though there really wasn't much else they could do to prepare.

Even Semele agreed the plan was solid, though coming from a wisp of smoke, Nico wasn't sure what that meant. He realized how hard it was to read the eidolon's emotions without being able to read her body language. Still, he chose to believe that her approval was a good thing, especially since she had to have seen a *lot* in her centuries of existence.

The rest of the camp seemed ready for the worst. Yazan, Deion, Savannah, and the kid from the First Cohort, Lucius, had volunteered (nay, demanded) to stand sentry outside the principia's entrance all night, each gingerly holding a Cocoa Puff. They said it was the least they could do for the mythics. Frank would be inside the praetors' office as a second line of

defense. He'd already called dibs on the cacodemon Anger because he felt like they'd work well together.

Will and Nico would be downstairs in the vault with the mythics and Hazel. Again, everyone would have a Puff, which would serve as their canaries in the proverbial coal mine. Semele didn't understand that reference, so Will launched into a ten-minute explanation of the phrase.

Nico knew Will was deeply nervous like the rest of them because he was talking a mile a minute. Will *also* pointed out that there might be more than one mythic-napper. They'd heard two different voices now—one low and gravelly, the other a high-pitched, singsongy ball of threats—so they couldn't be sure how many people might be working together. Nico kindly asked Will to stop bringing up facts that made everyone feel *worse*.

"Okay," he relented. "I'm just saying this whole thing stinks like Mr. D's feet on his pedicure days."

Nico wrinkled his nose. "Dude, that was…so unnecessary."

"But you know I'm right."

Hazel let out a long sigh. "If this is what your conversations are going to be like, it's gonna be a long night."

Frank smiled. "Almost makes me glad I'll be upstairs, but I'd still rather be at your side."

"I know," Hazel said. "I'll be fine. The intruder won't catch me off guard again."

"I hope you are right," said Semele next to Nico's shoulder.

Nico dropped his grilled-cheese sandwich in alarm. He had forgotten the eidolon was there. He really needed to figure out how to explain "personal space" to a non-corporeal being.

"You are still learning to control the Mist," Semele continued. "You will be facing an entity who likely has been using it for millennia."

"Hazel can do it," said Will. "Her powers are growing fast."

"That's right," Nico said. "If my little Care Bear here can learn archery, Hazel can out-magic a minor god."

That got Frank's attention. "Archery, huh?"

Will blushed, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation's detour. "Yeah. I'm overdue…. Like, a lifetime overdue."

“How’s it going?”

“Despite being so tired, I sneaked in a good training session this morning with one of your Lares—guy named Marcus?”

Frank nodded. “He was part of the auxilia in ancient times, from a famed battalion of Roman archers. You’re getting a lesson from one of the best archers ever. You should be an expert by, like…tomorrow.”

Will laughed nervously. “Don’t know about that, but I am getting better! I can hit the bull’s-eye more often now. On purpose, even!”

Nico waved off his comment. “You’re a child of Apollo. It’s clearly coming naturally to you. Besides, we all have to start somewhere, right?”

“Haven’t I used that exact logic on you before?” Will asked.

“And now I’m weaponizing it,” Nico said with a smirk. “How does it feel?”

“Oh my gods!” Hazel’s voice broke through their conversation. “Are you two going to be this sickeningly cute tonight?”

They both glanced at her.

“Deal with it,” said Nico.

Frank started to laugh. “Definitely glad I’m going to be outside,” he said.

The legion’s vault would not have been Nico’s first choice for a slumber party. The marble floor was hard. The arched ceiling glowed with harsh white light that couldn’t be adjusted. Rows of freestanding mahogany shelves marched down the center of the long room—some filled with books, others with boxes of artifacts or glass display cases. If a fight broke out in here, Nico worried all those shelves would fall like dominos, crushing them under an avalanche of antique magic weapons and battle trophies.

The only exit was a circular metal staircase that led back up to the praetors’ office. The trapdoor at the top was now sealed from both sides with magic and mechanical locks. Nico

had never been afraid of being underground, but after his experience as a prisoner in a bronze jar, he didn't love enclosed spaces.

Also, it was musty. Orcus spent the first half hour sneeze-farting, while Johan apologized that he hadn't brought a feather duster and complained that no self-respecting archivist would leave a collection in this condition.

"I will fix it," he promised. "Assuming we don't have to flee the camp. And assuming we are not abducted and brutally killed."

"Please stop assuming." Orcus sneezed so hard that he molted a blizzard of down.

Nothing happened for *hours*. Hazel sat cross-legged against the far wall, in front of a display of old battle standards. She looked like she was meditating, though that must have been difficult with a cacodemon rolling around in her lap. She'd insisted on choosing Guilt because she thought it would keep her focused on not failing again.

Semele drifted restlessly through the stacks. She was the only one who couldn't hold a cacodemon, and it seemed to make her uneasy. Every time she came across a row of manuscripts, she fumigated them, seeping between the pages and apparently absorbing what was written there. Nico wondered if this was the eidolon version of flipping through old magazines in a waiting room.

Will had unrolled his sleeping bag next to Nico's. He lounged on his side like a true Roman, absently scratching Grief's antlers while the cacodemon cooed with approval. By the end of the night, Nico figured, either Will would be overcome by grief, or Grief would be overcome by Will.

As for Nico, he'd chosen his old buddy Loneliness. The one-eyed urchin-like blob was now sprawled belly-up on Nico's sleeping bag, blissfully chewing on its drawstring.

This wasn't the first time Nico had done a stakeout, but he found it hard to relax. Maybe that was just as well. He couldn't afford to fall asleep.

Will tried to engage him in a rambling conversation, which Nico was thankful for, because it was the only thing that pulled his mind away from the unknown.

***So* many unknowns. Who was sneaking into Camp Jupiter? Why had they kidnapped Asterion, Arielle, and Quinoa? And what was this *court* the voice had mentioned last night?**

Nico had so little to go on, and it was in these undefined areas that his mind loved to imagine the worst: His new friends were dead. More were going to be kidnapped. Nico and Hazel wouldn't be able to stop it.

He glanced at Loneliness, who was chewing his drawstring into a frayed, soggy mess. *You're not actually alone right now*, he reminded himself. *You're not going to mess this up*.

He fiddled with his tessera pendant, which Savannah had gotten operational again after last night's meltdown. "Frank," he said.

Immediately, a glowing rainbow sphere blazed to life. Frank's floating head scowled out of it.

***"What?"* he snapped, and then immediately caught himself. "Sorry. Anger and I are getting in touch with our feelings." He took a deep breath and continued in a calmer voice, "What's going on down there?"**

"Nothing much," Nico said. "You?"

"All quiet," Frank reported. "We had a brief freak-out because Yazan swore he heard an intruder tunneling under the principia's front steps. Turned out to be a family of raccoons."

Will grinned. "You gotta keep an eye on those raccoons."

"Hrmph," Frank grumbled. "Long as no one else disappears tonight. Thanks for the update."

The Iris-message went dark.

Nico glanced down the length of the room. The mythics had disappeared somewhere in the stacks, though he could hear an occasional sneeze from Orcus.

"Semele?" he called. "All good down there?"

After a brief silence, Semele's muffled voice replied, "Everyone is accounted for."

Nico wondered if he'd interrupted her while she was trying to smoke a good book.

He gave Will a shrug. "Guess we just wait, then."

But his nerves did not calm down. Blood pulsed in his ears.

"This is getting to you, isn't it?" asked Will.

"A little bit."

Will reached across the sleeping bags and laced his fingers through Nico's.

"Just breathe," he whispered. "I'm right here. So is Hazel. We got this."

Nico remembered the exercises Mr. D had taught him. He tried his best to calm his breathing.

They waited.

And waited.

And waited.

CHAPTER 18

"Three o'clock in the morning," Will announced.

He'd brought a pocket watch to keep time, because of course he had.

Nico knew he should have felt tired, but he didn't. He barely wanted to blink, afraid he'd miss the inevitable.

If it *was* inevitable. The attack last night had happened much earlier. Was it possible the vault's magic protections had thwarted the witch lady? Or was she just trolling them, letting them stay up all night for nothing while she got her beauty sleep?

Nico was starting to think their plan was a bust. They'd had no further updates from Frank or the other sentries upstairs. The night had been quiet and annoyingly uneventful. He imagined the legionnaires manning the walls of Camp Jupiter were super bummed that they hadn't had anyone to impale with their ballistae or pour boiling oil on.

Nico was about to suggest taking a walk around the archive, just to stretch their legs, when the whole room went cuckoo with Cocoa Puffs. The unassigned cacodemons began bouncing around, hissing and howling. Loneliness scuttled up Nico's shirt and clung to his neck, sending a wave of memories straight into his bloodstream. *Curled in the bronze jar, waiting to die; alone in the Labyrinth, his sobs echoing through the dark stone tunnels.* Grief wriggled into a pocket in Will's cargo pants and started wailing, *Screee! Screee!* Guilt vaulted onto Hazel's head.

The demigods got to their feet. The mythics ran from the stacks to join them, their Puffs also going bonkers.

The room seemed to come into sharper focus. With Loneliness at his neck, Nico could smell mildew from the bookshelves, hear the low hum of magic in the walls, even taste the acrid dust infiltrating his nostrils. The air pressure dropped so suddenly that the metal trapdoor creaked above them.

"Someone's coming," Nico said. He tapped the tessera on his bracelet. "Frank?"

No answer.

"Deion?" Will tried. "Savannah? Yazan?"

Nothing.

Nico drew his Stygian blade. He locked eyes with Hazel, who nodded back. *Ready.*

It wasn't easy to look intimidating with a Cocoa Puff nested in your hair, but Hazel managed. She clenched her fists and took a deep breath. Her face was steely with determination. Her amber eyes locked onto something across the room—something Nico could not see.

"There you are," she growled. "Halt!"

The command rolled across the archive like a shock wave, almost knocking Nico off his feet. The light grew brighter, banishing shadows, making everything in the room look sharp and freshly created. The Cocoa Puffs continued to bounce about, snarling and growling. Nico could feel his demigod awareness buzzing into overdrive, his senses heightened to new levels, but when he followed Hazel's gaze, he still saw nothing. Will looked equally mystified.

Without warning, Hazel drew her Imperial gold spatha. She lunged forward so quickly Nico had to stumble out of her way. With her free hand, she grabbed…something, then pushed it against the far wall, her blade held horizontally at throat level.

"No more games," Hazel demanded. "Show yourself."

A woman flickered into a view. At least, she looked like a human woman. She wore a multi-pocketed sackcloth dress, cinched at the waist with a length of rope. Her feet were dirty and bare, her hair a wild mass of black. Her features were like those of a feral cat—bright angry eyes, dilated pupils, flared nostrils, and bared teeth that looked both too sharp and too numerous. The edge of Hazel's sword pressed against her windpipe.

The woman hissed. In one hand, she held a black iron staff. In the other, she gripped the tied-off mouth of a burlap sack.

Maybe she *was* related to La Befana, the Christmas witch. But if that sack was full of presents, Nico suspected they'd been stolen from children after this lady had knocked them unconscious.

"Who are you?" Hazel said. "What do you want?"

The woman snarled, struggling against Hazel's grip, but the Imperial gold blade dug deeper into her throat, breaking the skin. With a noxious hiss, golden fluid dribbled from the wound—ichor, the blood of the gods.

"Oh, Hazel, Hazel." The woman didn't look older than her mid-thirties, but her voice was gravelly and ancient, the way it had sounded the night before through the tessera. "You know exactly what I'm doing," she croaked. "I'm taking out the trash. And you are tonight's pickup!"

Nico advanced, his own sword raised. "Where did you take the others? What have you done with our friends?"

"Friends?" **The woman cackled. "They are not your friends, Nico di Angelo. They're monsters. Criminals. They have been charged, sentenced, and"—she paused, clearly relishing Nico's look of anguish—"*punished*."**

Nico's jaw trembled. Anger might have been upstairs with Frank, but Nico felt like he'd just swallowed the cacodemon whole. "What does that mean? Talk!"

Instead, she spat in Hazel's face.

Hazel barely reacted, but it was enough to loosen her grip. The woman pushed Hazel away, howled, and swung her staff. Hazel just managed to parry the strike. Orcus screeched and flew at the intruder. Johan lumbered into battle. Will raised his hand and summoned a flash of light so brilliant the woman winced and looked away—but it wasn't enough.

She swept her staff in a wide arc. It didn't connect with anyone, but Orcus, Johan, and Will all went flying backward, crashing into the back wall.

"Will!" Nico yelled, but he couldn't run to him. He couldn't leave Hazel alone against this witch. He stood his ground.

The intruder looked at Nico with amusement. She glanced at Hazel and rattled her burlap sack, which sounded like it was half-full of copper pots.

"Into my bag you go, Praetor Levesque," she said. "I'm not normally a murderous god, but if you won't be a good girl, I will happily kill everyone here."

"NO!" Nico charged and swung his blade. The woman raised her staff, but the Stygian iron edge cut clean through it. The sword met the side of the woman's neck….

And what happened next, Nico couldn't quite process, no matter how heightened his senses were. With no gush of ichor, no obvious cut, no gore of any kind, the woman's head disconnected from her body. It spiraled upward, but then, instead of falling, it floated in place, hovering just above her left shoulder.

"Oh, dear!" The head laughed with glee. "Whatever shall I do?"

Her body joined the charade, waving its arms frantically and running in a circle. The mythics and demigods watched, frozen in horror. Even the Cocoa Puffs didn't seem sure of how to feel.

"Well then," said the woman's head, her mouth twisting into a sneer, "I suppose we'll go with murdering—"

“STOP!” The god Terminus flash-banged into existence, placing himself between the intruder and Hazel.

It was one of those moments when Nico’s mind seemed to disconnect from the flow of time. He scanned his surroundings like a third-person observer. He saw Will struggling to his feet, apparently unhurt. He saw the blemmyae and the tiny griffin regaining their bearings as Semele fussed over them—a maternal cloud of smoke. He saw Hazel and himself with swords drawn, saved from somewhat-certain death at the hands of a headless witch by a statue with no arms. And he said to himself, *This is really my life.*

Terminus snarled. “You.”

The woman snarled right back. “Terminus. You useless chunk of marble.”

“Threaten these mortals again,” said the god, “and you will find out how useless I am.” He blinked. “That was a threat. It was meant to imply that I am actually very useful.”

“Terminus,” Hazel said in a low voice, “you know this person?”

Terminus scoffed. “You would have to dive very deep into Roman history to know her, Praetor Levesque. That’s how unimportant she is. This is Laverna, goddess of thieves, cheats, and liars. The disconnected head is a dead giveaway. It’s a thing she does.”

The goddess’s body did a grotesque curtsy that would have earned her a reprimand in the Fifth Cohort’s square-dancing classes. Her head floated down and reconnected with her neck.

“Delighted,” she said. “Always a pleasure to meet new Romans, steal from them, and disgrace their sorry excuse for a godly guardian.”

Terminus glowered. “Oh, you’re going to enjoy your time in a Roman jail!” He shifted on his pedestal. “That was sarcasm. It was meant to imply you will not enjoy your time at all.”

“Why are you stealing our friends?” Semele demanded, saving the god of boundaries from further awkwardness.

Laverna looked down her nose at the eidolon. “That word again. *Friends.* You are monsters. *Act* like it! You will all face the judgment of the court!”

Nico’s hands felt sweaty on the hilt of his sword. “What court?”

The goddess laughed. “Jump in my bag, little demigod, and you will find out. If you think I am terrifying, wait until you meet the masters: the judges!”

“ENOUGH!”

For a microsecond, Nico thought the booming voice had come from Terminus. But it was Will. He marched toward Laverna, his whole body wreathed in light. He glowed like his father's chariot, radiating enough heat to make steam curl off Nico's jacket.

Nico was speechless. He'd seen Will glow before. He'd teased him for being a Care Bear. But since when could he do *this*? Even stranger, the cacodemon Grief advanced at his heel, its antlers lowered.

Laverna hissed and backed away—perhaps because thieves and daylight do not go well together.

"You will tell us everything," Will ordered. "Or you'll burn."

Even Terminus looked impressed. "That's good. Do that!"

"It doesn't matter," the goddess growled. "You could kill me now, and a hundred more would be ready to take my place. We are putting the world to rights!"

"Who is *we*?" Will raised his hand. Even at a distance, the heat from his fingers made angry red blisters erupt on Laverna's face.

The goddess did the only sensible thing. She kicked Hazel in the shin and ran.

Nico jabbed at the goddess with his Stygian sword. He missed. Hazel stumbled into Will, who was forced to "flame off" to avoid incinerating her. Terminus yelled, "I've got her!" and tried to grab Laverna with his imaginary arms. Johan charged in to help, but with his horrible depth perception, he only managed to tackle Terminus. Orcus squawked. Semele shouted, "Stop her!" which was incredibly useful advice.

The goddess wove between her tormentors, doing her best to reach the stacks, where Nico figured she would try to disappear into the Mist. She would have gotten away with it too, if it hadn't been for those pesky Cocoa Puffs.

Loneliness sprang onto her dress, latching its appendages into the sackcloth and burrowing into the nearest pocket. Grief launched itself at Laverna's leg, sinking its teeth into her calf.

Laverna howled. She tried to shake the cacodemon off her leg, but Grief bit down even harder.

"What *are* you?" she screamed at the dark, spiky attack emotion. "Why do I feel so terrible?"

Nico almost laughed. Grief was probably not something a thief goddess was used to dealing with. She stumbled and fell to her knees, shrieking…and then she literally unraveled. Her hair turned into dirty threads like the head of a mop. Her face transformed into coils of jute. The

goddess collapsed, her flesh and clothes disintegrating until there was nothing left but a pile of rotten ropes.

Grief stood atop the pile, proudly shaking its antlers like, *Yeah, I did that*.

Loneliness shook itself free of the ropes. It was chewing on some kind of laminated card it must have retrieved from Laverna's pocket—maybe a stolen ID? That seemed like the sort of thing a thief goddess would carry.

Johan nudged the ropes with his foot. "Is she dead?"

Terminus snorted. "I doubt it. Just retreated into whatever dark sewer she calls home until she can regain her strength. But she won't be anxious to tangle with *me* again!"

The rest of the group looked too stunned to argue.

"Is everybody okay?" Hazel asked.

There seemed to be no injuries. No one was missing.

Orcus tilted his beak. "Does that mean we won?"

"We stopped Laverna," Semele corrected. "That is not the same as winning. And we should check on the sentries upstairs. I suspect we will find them fast asleep."

***Oh, great*, thought Nico. If Frank had spent all night hanging out with Anger and then fallen asleep on the job anyway, Frank and Anger were basically going to be the same person when they woke up.**

He studied Will, whose T-shirt and cargo pants were still steaming.

"What *was* that?" Nico demanded. "The light. The fire."

Will looked embarrassed. "Dunno. I got angry."

"Well…it was hot."

Will shrugged. "I *am* the son of the sun god."

"That's not what I meant," said Nico.

Hazel knelt next to the pile of rope formerly known as Laverna. She held out her hand to Loneliness, who was still chewing on his plastic prize. "Mind if I see that, buddy?"

Loneliness dropped the laminated card into her palm. The Puff's smile curled into a perfect half circle under its single eye, like it was enormously pleased with itself.

Hazel brought the card over to Nico. It was an ID, but not any kind that Nico would have expected. He wiped off the Puff drool. Printed on green card stock, glistening in its slightly chewed plastic sleeve, was a court officer's identification badge.

Laverna's face stared back at him, though she'd combed her hair and put on a power dress for the photo. Underneath was her name, along with what Nico assumed was a made-up surname: LAVERNA SHIRLIUS. Okay…Next to that, around the seal of California, small block letters read: CALIFORNIA SUPERIOR COURT, COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO.

Nico's mouth twitched up in a half smile. "Well, gang, I think in the mystery business they call this a *clue*."

CHAPTER 19

The entire group had to talk Nico out of leaving for San Francisco immediately. They sat around the desk in the praetors' office—along with Frank, who had indeed been indistinguishable from Anger when they woke him up—and commiserated about how annoying thief goddesses were, and how much they wanted to find Laverna Shirlius, chain her up, and force her to listen to Vitellius Reticulus's war stories for the rest of eternity.

"First, we need to get some rest," said Will. "We can't go into the city exhausted."

Hazel examined the laminated ID card. "Plus, the courthouse is not going to be open at four in the morning. I suppose we could sneak in, but it'll be easier to poke around unnoticed when there are a lot of regular mortals around."

Nico sighed. "Yeah, you're right."

Frank took the ID card from Hazel. He scowled at the goddess's photo. "So, we think this lady has been stealing our mythics and…what? Taking them to San Francisco Superior Court to try them for misdemeanor trespassing?"

"I don't know," Nico admitted. "Laverna said she was bringing them before the judges, her *masters*. She said these judges were even more powerful than she was, and they were putting the world to rights."

Semele drifted behind him, her smoke curling around the legion's eagle standard. "I have existed for three millennia," she said. "Anytime someone says they are putting the world to rights…they are not."

Nico sat back in his chair, and a half-dozen Puffs jumped into his lap. "I don't like any part of this. I was excited because we'd actually gotten some information. Now I have a thousand more questions."

Will ran his hand through his blond curls. He seemed to have come through his pyrotechnic outburst with nothing permanently singed or seared. "Later in the morning," he said, "we'll head into the city together. We will figure this out."

"It should be you three," said Frank. "Hazel, Will, Nico. I'll stay here and hold the fort."

Hazel put her hand on his forearm. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. “We have no idea what Laverna or these ‘judges’ might do now that we’ve thwarted their latest attack. One of us needs to be here to reassure the legion and keep our guests safe. You know word about what happened in the principia is going to spread faster than that cold did last month.”

“We will help you!” Johan promised.

Right on cue, he and Orcus both sneezed. It was probably just from the dust in the archives, but Nico made a mental note to take some vitamin C. The last thing he needed was some Roman respiratory virus.

Hazel frowned at Frank. “Fine,” she relented. “But I’m joining Nico in the *I don’t like any part of this* club.”

Nico smiled. “You can be the vice president.”

Will stifled a yawn. “Well, I’m the president of the *Please can we get some sleep* club, and membership is mandatory, Nico.”

“I’ll stay up a bit longer,” said Frank grumpily. “To make sure there’s no other activity. Besides, I already *had* my sleep.”

Hazel gave her boyfriend a kiss. “That was *not* your fault.” Then she faced Will and Nico. “Meet you two in the mess hall by nine?”

Nico did the math on how much sleep that would get him. *A ridiculously small amount* plus *not enough* equaled *it was going to be a long day.*

“Okay.” He stood and stretched. Exhaustion crept into the edges of his awareness. Even Jealousy yawned at his feet. “Come on, Puffs.”

Nico headed out of headquarters, his Puffs trailing after him. From behind them, Will laughed.

“What?” Nico demanded.

“You’re like the Pied Piper of Darkness.”

Nico rolled his eyes, though deep down, he kind of loved that idea.

Nico was not surprised by his dream. He found himself in the dark room again, unable to move in his chair, facing a backlit door with someone incessantly knocking to get in. This time, though, Asterion, Quinoa, and Arielle stood in front of him, frowning like an interrogation squad.

“Why couldn’t you protect me?” Arielle complained.

“All I wanted was a better life,” Quinoa said.

“I even knitted you a cap,” Asterion said. “So much for demigod promises.”

Nico woke with a start.

Daylight streamed through the barracks windows. In the next bunk over, Will slept peacefully, his chest rising and falling ever so slowly. The Cocoa Puffs snoozed in a pile at Nico’s feet—except for Guilt, who had snuggled into the crook of Nico’s arm.

That probably explained the dream. Even if it was only his own guilt finding a voice, it made sense that Nico would imagine the mythics blaming him for their capture, reminding him of how badly he had failed.

That didn’t unsettle him too much. Yes, he felt guilty, which was only natural. His friends had been kidnapped. More of them could be taken in the future. Anyone would be worried about that.

Instead, he was curious why his demigod brain kept spitting out this same nightmare about the dark room and the unknown presence knocking at the door.

Was his subconscious trying to tell him something? Was an actual god or daimon trying to get his attention?

A sense of dread kept building inside him, no matter how much he tried to sweep it away. A voice in his head whispered, *You’ve already failed—you just don’t know it yet*.

He was a demigod. The son of Hades! Had he ever faced a quest he couldn’t complete?

And yet now that this mythics dilemma was starting to feel like an actual quest—go to the courthouse, find and rescue his friends, beat whatever baddies had abducted them—Nico was starting to wonder if this would be the first quest he’d fail.

He was tempted to wake Will and tell him what he was feeling.

But no. He couldn’t disrupt Will’s chance to get a few more winks.

Instead, he tried to calm his emotions. *Breathe, Nico*, he told himself. *Don’t let your thoughts run wild.*

He tickled Guilt's smoky belly. Its spider legs kicked in the air.

Memories flooded Nico's mind. *Marching into Manhattan with his father to join the battle against Kronos; fighting the giants at the Acropolis side by side with Hazel; saying good-bye to Bianca and realizing what an impact her heroism had left on the world.*

They were not memories of guilt, exactly. They were memories of times he'd worked *through* guilt and turned it into *pride*.

Nico studied the sleeping Puff. "What are you trying to tell me?" he whispered.

Guilt cooed and growled in its sleep.

He didn't understand what was happening with the cacodemons. They were changing, communicating in more ways than just their signature emotions. But that mystery would have to wait. He got up quietly, trying not to disturb Will or the Puffs. He gathered some spare clothes and a towel and slipped outside to visit the Roman baths.

The baths were easily his favorite thing about Camp Jupiter. He hadn't had time to visit them yet, but he figured if he was going into San Francisco today on a rescue mission, he might as well get cleaned up first.

Even after a long night, most of the legion had already risen, eaten, and gone to their morning drills, so Nico had the place pretty much to himself. First, he showered in one of the waterfall rooms, which the local naiads kept circulating at the exact right temperature. Nico wasn't sure how, but the shower's steam changed its scent to be the most relaxing for each particular guest. For Nico this morning it was fresh frittelle—the fried donut balls his neighborhood pasticceria used to make in Venice when he was little.

From there, he risked a plunge in the frigidarium—cold, very, very cold—nearly scalded himself in the caldarium, and then sat soaking in the tepidarium, admiring the vaulted mosaic ceiling as his muscles unknotted.

It wasn't until then that he realized how much the sound and presence of water calmed him these days. His breath work and meditation sessions with Mr. D had always taken place on the shore of Long Island Sound. The baths were totally different, of course, but the water still brought him a sense of tranquility.

That was what Nico needed: to calm his mind, which wanted so badly to run wild like a pack of telkhines.

He closed his eyes and disappeared into his own head. Flashes of his nightmare tried to fight their way forward, but he pushed them aside. What had Mr. D said about him earlier that week?

You're not used to being still.

In the past, Nico would've tried to dismiss the idea by making a joke. Now, finding stillness in the swirling water didn't seem so overrated. Nico had been running his entire life: from his childhood in Italy; from the deaths of his mother, then Bianca, then Jason; and from Titans and gods and dead emperors. Then there was Tartarus….

Would he ever get to just *rest*?

He heard voices echoing in the baths. Apparently some of the cohorts were coming in to wash up after their morning drills. Soon the place would be too full for his liking, so he quietly made his way out of the water. He changed and headed out into the crisp Bay Area morning.

It looked like a normal day at Camp Jupiter. Cohorts went through their usual routines. Lares floated down the street, criticizing legionnaires for dress-code violations or regaling anyone who would listen with stories about Back in the Day. But Nico could tell something was different. Maybe it was the way campers greeted him as they passed, nodding with respect. By now, they all must have heard what had happened last night. Some complimented him on his bravery in the principia. Others asked if Will was still on fire, or strangest of all, how "our friends" the mythics were doing. The legion had come together at last and decided the mythics weren't so bad. All it had taken was a common enemy that was even scarier. Nico still wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He found Hazel and Frank outside the mess hall. Hazel obviously had slept, showered, and changed into fresh clothes. Frank obviously had not.

"Hey, how'd you sleep?" Hazel asked.

"Eh," Nico said. "So-so."

"I'm about to get a few hours myself," said Frank.

"Everything good overnight?"

He nodded. "All the remaining mythics are safe and accounted for. They've temporarily moved into the Fifth Cohort's barracks for extra security, at Lavinia's invitation."

"Good idea," Nico said. "If anyone tries to infiltrate that barracks, they'll be subjected to a lethal amount of square dancing."

Hazel snorted. "True enough. Look, I just grabbed a breakfast burrito to go. I'd suggest you do the same. We should head out soon. We don't know how long it will take for Laverna to recover from last night, or when she's going to realize her ID card is missing."

Nico's heart skipped a beat. "I hadn't thought of that. Let me go see if Will is up yet."

Hazel raised a peace sign. “Meet at the Decumanian Gate in fifteen?”

“We’ll be there!”

After grabbing a bag o’ breakfast burritos, Nico dashed back to the barracks. His mind was still trying to pull him in a million directions—his guilt about past failures, his fear of the future and all its unknowns—but he quietly reminded himself to stay *still*, right here in this moment.

He might not be very good at it, but he was learning.

Will was awake. He’d already dressed and prepared his backpack. Now he was filling his cargo shorts’ pockets with every conceivable kind of emergency supply. When Nico arrived, the Cocoa Puffs were bouncing around Will’s feet, excited and eager, like they all wanted a ride in his pouches.

The sight filled Nico with mixed emotions. On one hand, he loved how the Puffs were becoming part of their lives. He felt certain they were trying to help—heightening his awareness, giving him better access to his feelings. Grief had even bitten a goddess in the leg, which was definitely a bold new stage in the mourning process.

On the other hand, he worried about how the Puffs were changing, and how they might be changing him. He didn’t understand it, which made him feel vulnerable. Nico had heard the expression *wearing your heart on your sleeve*. Taking the Puffs into an unknown hostile environment would be like going into battle with his entire soul exposed. He didn’t want to risk it, even if the Puffs provided a boost to his demigod observational powers.

“Hey, Puffs.” Nico knelt in front of them. “Listen…I’m going to ask Frank to look in on you later today, but I’m afraid that you’ll need to stay here while we go into town.”

The cacodemons immediately went into temper-tantrum mode—whining, growling, and throwing their bodies against one another. Loneliness gave him the sad Cyclopean puppy-dog eye, which nearly broke Nico’s heart.

“I know, I know,” he said. “But we have no idea what we’re going to encounter out there. I want to make sure you’re safe. I promise we won’t be gone long.”

Defiance puffed up his spines, leaped onto the bed, and sat facing the wall. All the other Puffs followed his example, making a line of pouting demonic puffballs with their backs turned on Nico.

Will joined Nico at his side and frowned. “Are your emotions on strike?”

“I think so,” Nico said. “Down with Nico, I guess.”

Will hefted his backpack over his shoulder. “I’m Team Nico,” he said to the Puffs. “Sorry. But I think you should all stay.”

Another chorus of disapproval rang out, and Nico’s heart broke further.

Before Nico could crumble and relent, Will gestured for Nico to follow him. The two of them left the guest barracks. Nico wondered if this was what it felt like when a parent dropped their kid off at kindergarten for the first time. He sensed he was doing the right thing, but he also felt like each one of those pouting cacodemons had stuck a tiny knife into his heart.

Will squeezed his shoulder. “They’ll be okay. And hey, I hope you’re not going to be upset with me, but I was thinking we probably shouldn’t shadow-travel into the city. Better to just take the BART train.”

“Totally agree,” Nico said.

“Wait, really?”

“We have to be prepared for whatever we find at the courthouse. I don’t want to arrive there exhausted.”

“Huh,” said Will. “That was easier than I thought it was going to be.”

“Come on, I’m not *that* reckless. Just promise me you won’t tell Hazel that poop-on-the-subway story.”

Will threw his hands in the air. “But it’s a classic! Everyone who takes public transportation has a story like that!”

“I think you wildly overestimate how much poop people encounter on a daily basis, Will.”

His boyfriend rolled his eyes. “Whatever. You love my stories.”

As they walked to the camp’s western gate, munching their breakfast burritos, Nico sensed Will sizing him up. “You look like you got some actual rest, at least. Is the Underworld freezing over?”

“Some parts of it actually *are* freezing over, Sun Boy.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t know. My boyfriend only takes me to the most romantic destination spots.”

Nico laughed. “I love it when Sassy Solace shows up.”

Hazel was waiting for them at the gate, pacing back and forth like she was deep in thought.

“The Mist,” she said.

“What about it?” Nico asked.

“I think I’m going to have to use it to hide us when we get there.”

Will tilted his head. “All three of us? For the entire time?”

“I think I can do it,” she said. “Last night…It’s hard to explain, but I think I had kind of a breakthrough—I learned an easier way to manipulate the Mist. I want to try, anyway.”

Nico remembered just a few days ago, when making some illusionary traffic barriers had almost made Hazel pass out.

“Uhhh…okay,” he said. “Do you think we’ll need it?”

“The court is a *very* public space,” she explained. “Right in the middle of downtown San Francisco. Plus, we don’t know what we’re walking into. I’d prefer more disguise to less disguise.”

“Good point,” said Will. “Well, I’m down for a little Mist adventure. Can you make Nico look like Sweeney Todd? Maybe give him a handlebar mustache? I’d love to see that.”

“Or you could make Will look like a service dog,” Nico suggested. “I’m thinking a golden retriever.”

Hazel crossed her arms. “I could just leave you two here. Maybe pop over to New Rome and ask Percy and Annabeth if they want to join me instead.”

Nico groaned. “Please leave that boy *alone*.”

Will laughed. “Can you *imagine*? I think he would stab you with that pen-sword of his.”

“Bold of you to assume Annabeth wouldn’t stab her first,” said Nico.

Hazel sighed. “Well then, I suppose I’m stuck with you. We should get going.” She hesitated. “You know…I’m actually nervous.”

“Me, too,” admitted Will.

Nico zipped up his bomber jacket. “Now I feel better about being nervous as well. Let’s go find our friends.”

CHAPTER 20

When the three demigods emerged from the Caldecott Tunnel entrance, they found Yazan and Deion standing guard.

The sentries stood a little straighter when they saw Hazel.

“Take care of camp, all right?” she told them.

“Of course, Praetor,” said Deion.

Yazan winced. “Yeah, I won’t fall asleep this time.”

Hazel patted his shoulder. “That happened to both of us, Yazan. No judgment. Besides, I don’t think Laverna will be showing her face around here anytime soon.”

“Kinda hope she does.” Deion gave them a conspiratorial grin. “We built her a shrine last night on Temple Hill.”

Nico raised an eyebrow. “You did?”

“The whole Second Cohort,” Deion said. “Remember what Jason Grace wanted—a shrine for every god, right?”

“Except we designed Laverna’s like a holding cell,” Yazan said. “It’s got a gate with iron bars on the front, wide open. Inside, there’s a metal bunk bed, a toilet, and a little altar with a basket of gold coins and a sign that says ‘Please Steal.’ ”

Will looked impressed. “You made her shrine a trap?”

“Or *is* it a trap?” Deion said. “We figure the mystery will drive her bonkers. Her first real shrine in millennia, and she won’t be sure if it’s safe to take the offerings.”

“That is next-level passive-aggressive,” Will said. “You guys are terrible.”

“Thank you!” Yazan said. “Good hunting, you three. Bring back our mythic friends!”

Deion actually saluted as the travelers made their way down the hillside.

“I’m starting to understand why your minor gods are so salty,” Nico said. “You Romans do not mess around.”

Hazel threw an arm around his shoulders. “Never forget it, brother.”

With that, she led them toward the Rockridge BART station.

Half an hour later, the three of them boarded a Yellow Line train for San Francisco. Late-morning commuters took up most of the seats, so the demigods stood next to the doors, holding on to the overhead hand straps.

As they passed through the Oakland stations, Nico was struck by the strangeness of it all. He'd felt the same way months ago when he and Will had ridden the train into New York. All these humans around them…none of them knew what he was on his way to do. They didn't know a thing about monsters or gods or spirits. They had no idea of the constant battles and conflicts unfolding in the world of the demigods. This time, though, Nico didn't feel envious of their ignorance. He didn't want to live in a world without mythical chaos. He was *happy* to be a demigod.

I'm happy with myself, he thought. *Wow. That's new.*

He wondered how Mr. D would react to that. The god would probably take all the credit and say *See? I told you so.* Nico decided he should just keep his happiness to himself.

The train lurched as it came into MacArthur Station, and Hazel crashed into Will.

"Sorry," she said. "I guess I don't have my train legs yet."

"Yeah, it takes time." Will anchored himself with his feet apart, his knees slightly bent. "The trick to interior subway and train surfing is anticipating the motion."

"Train surfing?" asked Hazel, raising an eyebrow.

"It's actually pretty similar to catching a wave. Like, for instance, you have to pick your wave carefully. You should also pick your car carefully."

"Will…" Nico warned. He could see the gears turning in his boyfriend's mind. He knew exactly where this was heading.

"One summer," Will forged on, "my mom and I were leaving the Met, and we got in this one subway car that was totally empty—"

"Will," Nico said more forcefully. "Don't do it."

“Oops,” Will said. “Sorry. It just slips out sometimes!”

“What’s happening here?” Hazel said.

“He was going to tell you the Poop Story, and I won’t allow it.”

“Free speech, bro,” said Will.

“I’m not the government! That’s not how it works!”

Hazel shook her head. “Are Frank and I this annoying?”

“Probably more so,” said Nico.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Okay, Will. Now I need to hear the Poop Story. Please continue.”

By the time the train left West Oakland, Will had satisfied her curiosity, Nico felt queasy, and the car was packed with passengers. Nico squeezed closer to Will, who reached down and grabbed his hand.

“You doing okay?”

“Despite your story, yes,” said Nico. “I just wish I knew what we’re going to find.”

Will and Hazel both nodded.

“Who are these judges?” Hazel wondered. “What do they want with Asterion and his friends? And me?”

Neither Will nor Nico had an answer. Soon their conversation was drowned out by the shrill sound of the train’s wheels on the track as it entered the tunnel under the San Francisco Bay. Nico covered his ears to block out the banshee screeching. It sounded like some sort of incursion from *his* world—something straight out of Hades’s Fields of Punishment.

When they arrived at City Center Station and climbed the stairs to street level, Nico was actually relieved to escape the underground. They stepped into a bright and brisk morning in downtown San Francisco.

As they crossed the wide expanse of Civic Center Plaza, Nico could almost believe they were back in New Rome. Classical-style buildings lined the park: the public library with its tall windows; the Asian Art Museum with its columned portico and colorful banners; the massive white edifice of City Hall, its central dome gleaming with gold filigree.

The green space itself was big enough to house a playground and several sports fields. Along the central promenade stood rows of stunted sycamore trees with pale gray trunks, their

leafless branches cut back so severely they weren't much more than warty lumps. The trees reminded Nico a bit too much of the ones on the Fields of Asphodel, where he'd found Hazel wandering in the Afterlife. Maybe Hazel had the same impression. She steered well clear of the trees.

"Where are we headed?" Nico asked.

Hazel pointed to a building across the street from City Hall.

As far as municipal facilities went, the San Francisco Superior Courthouse looked unremarkable. Its gray stone facade was set with repeating arched windows. The entrance on the corner of Polk and McAllister had no grand portico, no steps, no fancy columns—just a door. It might have been any old office building, or a particularly grim branch of the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"I don't get it," Will said. "If you were some kind of powerful supernatural court, abducting mythics, why would you set up here? Why not over there?" He gestured at the much grander California Supreme Court building, just across McAllister, which took up one entire side of the plaza.

"Don't know." Hazel dug a hair tie from her pocket and tried to tame her curls. "We're going to have to go in and find out."

She pulled out Laverna's court ID card and hung it around her neck. "Hopefully this opens some doors for us, but let me disguise us with the Mist. Just to be safe."

She put her hand on Will's shoulder and closed her eyes in concentration.

One moment, Will Solace looked like himself. The next, he looked like Will Solace, the director's cut. He wore a sharp navy three-piece suit. His hair was much shorter, shorn close on the sides and styled on top with some sort of gel. His brown leather dress shoes practically shone in the morning sun. He even smelled different, like he'd spritzed himself with some high-priced cologne called Executive. The whole effect made him seem about ten years older.

Nico choked back a laugh. "You look *ridiculous*."

Will raised his arms and frowned. "I don't understand. I look the same!"

"To yourself, you do," said Hazel.

"Say something about tech stocks," Nico prompted. "Or adjustable-rate mortgages!"

Will winced. "Ew, am I wearing a *suit*?"

"You look very handsome," said Hazel. "Just *very* different."

"Do Nico now," Will said, practically glowing with giddy anticipation.

Nico was certain that wearing a suit would melt the flesh off his bones, but before he could protest, Hazel reached out and grabbed his shoulder.

Now it was Will's turn to laugh.

"What?" Nico demanded. "What do I look like?"

There were actual tears in his boyfriend's eyes. "Just do one thing for me, Nico. Hold up your briefcase and say, 'I'd like to approach the bench, Your Honor.' "

"Briefcase?" He wasn't holding anything in his hands. He appeared to be wearing the same grubby black jeans, T-shirt, and bomber jacket that he'd started the day with. He looked at Hazel in a panic. "What did you do?"

"Calm down, brother," she said. "You can totally pull off baby-blue seersucker."

"Seersucker?"

"We're going into a courthouse," she said. "So we're all going to look like lawyers. Watch, I'll do me now."

She closed her eyes again. This time, Nico tried to pay attention. He wanted to see exactly how Hazel worked the change…but his mind wouldn't cooperate. Or rather, it cooperated only with *Hazel*. It kept telling him Hazel had *always* looked like this, even after she transformed. Only a half second later did Nico manage to rewind and think, *Wait. How did she do that?*

His half sister now wore a burgundy pantsuit with black high heels that made her a few inches taller. On her ID tag, the photo showed Hazel's face rather than Laverna's. Her hair was braided in an elegant updo, and her lipstick and eyeshadow were tinted warm gold.

Nico shook his head in amazement. "Hazel, you look like you're about to deliver the best closing argument the world has ever heard."

She grinned. "You know, gotta look the part."

Will was *still* focused on Nico and struggling not to laugh. "Seriously, dude. Just say, 'I'd like to make a deposit, sir.' "

Nico scowled. "I'm going to shadow-travel you back to Tartarus and leave you there."

"All right, get used to each other," Hazel chided. "We have to stick close together, because I haven't quite mastered long-distance illusions."

"Well, I'm impressed," Nico said, admiring Hazel's illusionary earrings. "What was that breakthrough you mentioned, about how to control the Mist?"

She tilted her head. “Hard to explain. I realized the Mist has…currents, I guess? It wants to move in a certain direction. Like I was paddling upstream, trying to make the Mist do what I wanted. That’s exhausting. I needed to pay attention to where the Mist wanted to go and flow with it. Much easier.”

“So the Mist wanted me to wear baby-blue seersucker today?”

Hazel beamed. “Yes, let’s blame the Mist for that. Now, come on, you two. And don’t go wandering off.”

Once inside the courthouse, the three of them stood waiting at the security checkpoint. Sounds echoed through the lobby rotunda—conversations, high heels on tile, the beeping of metal detectors. The noise was overwhelming to Nico. He worried that the security officers would ask them for IDs. Or his Stygian iron sword would set off alarms. Or Will’s cargo pants pockets would—gods only knew what Will had in those.

The only awkward moment was when the guard reminded Nico to retrieve his personal effects from the X-ray machine tray and Nico had to pantomime picking up his nonexistent briefcase.

After they’d passed through the metal detectors, the demigods stepped to one side of the lobby, next to a café cart.

“What now?” Nico whispered.

Hazel frowned. “I was hoping to see somewhere to use Laverna’s ID. I thought that’s how we’d gain access—”

“Excuse me.” Someone brushed against Nico’s shoulder.

It was a bike courier with a bag slung over his shoulder and a large box in his arms. He squeezed past the demigods, navigated around a gaggle of business suits, and headed deeper into the lobby. Something about the courier’s gait caught Nico’s attention. He loped along, almost jumping with each step, as if he were used to having much longer legs.

“Hazel,” Nico said. “That courier…”

“I see him,” she said. “He’s flickering in and out of the Mist. I don’t think he’s human.”

Will spotted the courier, just turning down a side corridor. “He looks normal to me. What did *you* two see?”

“I’m not sure,” Hazel said. “But let’s follow him.”

The three of them tried their best to blend in with the crowd. They allowed a few other people to get between them and the courier as they trailed him down the hallway.

Nico's pulse thumped in his ears. He felt itchy all over. He knew the clothes he was wearing were just an illusion. But somehow he could sense them even though he couldn't see them. Suits and Nico di Angelo did *not* mix.

The courier began walking faster. For a brief instant, Nico could see him through the Mist—some sort of muscular creature covered in dark fur. Then he ducked down another side corridor on the left.

When they reached the intersection, the courier was nowhere to be seen.

"Which way now?" asked Will.

Hazel pointed to a set of double doors halfway down the hall on the right. "I think…maybe that way."

They stopped in front of the doors—frosted glass in frames of polished oak. There was no sign, no indication of what was inside. Nico tried the brass door handle, but it was locked.

"Look." Hazel pointed to a small black card reader on the wall. She lifted Laverna's laminated ID. "You think?"

"Worth a try," Nico agreed.

Hazel held the ID up to the card reader by the door. A green light illuminated on the panel, and then there was a *click*.

"Yes!" hissed Will.

Nico pushed down on the door handle again. The door swung inward, but he didn't open it all the way.

"Are we ready?" he asked.

"We *have* to be," whispered Hazel. "Whatever is through here, it must be where Laverna took our friends."

"Well, we've got each other's backs," said Will. "Let's find out together."

Nico took a deep breath and then slowly opened the door wide.

The demigods quickly shuffled inside. They lined up against the back wall of what looked like a normal human courtroom. It was wide and brightly lit, with light brown wood paneling on the walls. About a dozen spectators sat in multiple rows of cushioned folding chairs, watching the proceedings. A lawyer was addressing the jury while a black-gowned judge observed from the bench.

A court officer glanced at the demigods as they entered, but she looked more bored than suspicious.

Nico found three empty seats in the back row. He sat, his nerves vibrating with fear and confusion. Hazel and Will slid in on either side of him.

Nico scanned the room but saw no sign of the courier they'd been following. The lawyer droned on about some sort of contract violation, which clearly had nothing to do with minor gods kidnapping mythical creatures.

"Did we take a wrong turn?" Nico whispered.

"I don't think so." Hazel pressed her fingertips to her temples. "Gods, my head…"

Her burgundy pantsuit flickered. For just a moment, her outfit changed into Hazel's normal street clothes; then it reverted to Lawyer Hazel.

"You okay?" Will murmured.

"Can't concentrate." She winced. "You know how I said the Mist has currents? In here, it feels like whitewater rapids."

"I have something that might help." Will flipped open the canvas top of his backpack, which for some reason the Mist had chosen not to disguise. He was probably looking for a Kit Kat bar, but he got more than he bargained for. Multiple Cocoa Puffs tumbled from the pack and scurried under Nico's chair.

Hazel clamped her hand over her mouth. "You brought the *Puffs*?" she whispered through her fingers.

"No!" Will whispered back. "I didn't know they were in there, honest!"

In the row in front of them, a woman turned and put a finger to her lips.

Nico glared down at Defiance. The cacodemon puffed up its spines, as if daring Nico to say something.

Then Anger jumped into Hazel's lap, making her gasp. Her eyes widened. Her forehead beaded with sweat.

"What's wrong?" Nico murmured. He reached over to take the cacodemon from Hazel, but Anger snarled at him, revealing its glowing yellow tongue and hundreds of sharp teeth.

"Leave it," Hazel whispered. "In fact, pick up a Puff. Both of you."

Nico locked eyes with Will, who shrugged as if to say *Dude, I don't know!*

"Do it," Hazel said softly. "Just…trust me."

Will scooped up Guilt. Nico let Defiance jump into his lap. As soon as he ran his hand across the Puff's spines, the whole world spun.

The courtroom went blurry and out of focus. He squeezed his eyes shut and saw stars glowing in the darkness.

"What's happening?" Will groaned.

Nico couldn't reply. His tongue was thick in his mouth, like he'd swallowed a gallon of molasses.

When he opened his eyes again…the courtroom had become a cave.

Torches lined the walls, bathing the rock in red light and causing shadows to dance among the stalactites on the ceiling. Descending rows of semicircular benches filled the cavernous space, creating a sort of underground theater. There were not dozens but *hundreds* of spectators…most of whom were not human. Ogres and empousai, centaurs and blemmyae, dryads and harpies all milled together. The court officer had transformed into a Cyclops—seven feet tall, with a nail-studded wooden club resting across her shoulder.

Everyone's attention seemed fixed on the front of the room, where the judge's desk had been transformed into a much grander tribunal—three thrones of red velvet behind a long bench of dark mahogany. Occupying the thrones were three figures in identical black robes, their faces hidden behind golden comedy masks like in an ancient Greek play. Each mask was terrifyingly grotesque in its own way—a leering satyr's face on the left, a snake-haired gorgon on the right, and in the center…

Oh, yikes. Nico recognized that face, even though the mask was an exaggerated caricature, like the kind people wear pretending to be American presidents on Halloween. The central judge wore the grinning visage of Hades.

Nico met Hazel's gaze. The mask had clearly unsettled her as well.

Fake Hades rose. The entire assembly did the same, forcing the three demigods to their feet while trying to keep hold of their respective Cocoa Puffs. Nico wasn't sure how, but the Puffs were obviously heightening their senses again, helping them see through the torrents of Mist. Nico just hoped the Puffs didn't start howling and jumping around, like they'd done when Laverna showed up at the principia.

Fake Hades banged his gavel. The sharp sound echoed through the cave.

"The Court of the Dead is now in session." The judge's voice boomed, masculine and familiar. Nico had heard it in his dreams, warning him not to help the mythics. "Bring forth the next defendant!"

What did that mean? The Court of the *Dead*?

From the shadows to the right of the bench, the courier emerged, still holding his large box. His face and long brown hair were unchanged, as was his delivery uniform, but it was now obvious that he wasn't human. Donkey ears sprouted from either side of his head. A donkey tail curled from his polyester shorts. His feet had become hooves. Some kind of satyr, maybe? Nico wasn't sure.

The courier set down his delivery in front of the judges. He whipped out an X-ACTO knife, cut through the packing tape, and then tipped over the box. Out spilled a sleek humanoid creature that should have been much too big to fit in such a small cube. It was a telkhine, one of the dog-seal-human hybrid creatures who had once worked the gods' undersea forges before they'd been replaced by Cyclopes.

The telkhine's hands had webbed fingers with long white claws. Its wrists were shackled to a heavy iron chain. The feet were little more than stubby flippers, no good for running, but its ankles had been shackled too. The creature struggled to stand, its whiskers quivering on its canine snout. It snarled at the satyr courier, who promptly smacked it across the nose. The crowd jeered and laughed at the prisoner, until the middle judge banged his gavel again.

"Morpho the telkhine," the judge said, his voice echoing through the chamber, "your trial begins now."

"Nico," said Hazel under her breath. "This feels familiar."

The person sitting in front of them turned again and frowned. Nico now realized she was some sort of storm spirit. Her nebulous dress flashed with lightning, and her eyes glowed tornado green. When she shushed the trio this time, a cold wind swirled around them.

They all fell silent, but Nico's mind raced. He knew exactly what Hazel was talking about. This tribunal with its masked judges…it felt like a distorted copy of the court in the Underworld, where newly arrived ghosts were assigned to their eternal fates: Elysium, Asphodel, or Punishment.

But this couldn't be happening with Hades's permission. Judgment in the Underworld was a somber affair. No spectators allowed. No Cyclops-at-arms, or shackles and chains. And Hades would *never* have permitted the main judge to wear a mask that mocked him.

The first judge was speaking again. ". . . stand trial for your crimes. My colleague will now read from your official record."

"I have an *official record*?" Morpho shrieked, yanking on their restraints. "I did not consent to this. Let me go!"

The judge on the right, in the gorgon mask, unfurled a parchment. "Morpho," she read with a British accent, "over the course of your career, you have been observed causing bodily harm to demigods, frightening humans, stalking your prey, committing arson, and practicing cannibalism."

"Cannibalism?" The telkhine snarled. "Okay, I bit that annoying demigod Eric on the arm one time, but I didn't *eat* him. I'm not a *zombie*!"

The judge paused for a moment, then dramatically lifted a quill and scribbled on the scroll. "You have also been known to interrupt figures of authority."

"I— *What*?" Morpho screamed.

"Exactly," said the judge. Then she continued reading.

It took her nearly five minutes to recite Morpho's official record. The entire time, Nico's back muscles got tighter and tighter. He didn't know Morpho, but as the list got into ridiculous minutiae like "offensive body odor" and "lack of grooming," Nico felt like this *had* to be a joke. How could someone be hauled into court in shackles and chains because they had bad personal hygiene?

But the vibe in the cave was raucous and bloodthirsty. The onlookers howled and cheered with every detail the judge read aloud. The Cyclops-at-arms let them scream. The two other judges sat back in their velvet thrones, their gold masks glinting in the firelight, their arms crossed. They seemed to be enjoying the excitement of the crowd, soaking in its rage.

Finally, the gorgon-masked judge lowered her scroll. "Morpho, do you accept this accounting of your official record?"

“Of course not!” Morpho pulled against their chains. “What is this? What gives you the right to judge me?”

Nico turned to Hazel. Tears streamed down her face. She had to be remembering her own moment before the court in the Underworld, when she’d been sentenced to roam the Fields of Asphodel forever. Nico had never died (though not for lack of trying). He could only imagine how horrifying it would be to wake up as a ghost and find yourself standing in front of three inquisitors who could see straight into your soul, who could judge everything you’d ever thought and done, decide how good or bad a person you had been, and punish you accordingly, with no possibility of appeal.

He took his sister’s hand. In Hazel’s lap, Anger snarled and bared its teeth like it wanted to bite everyone in the courtroom.

On Nico’s other side, Will looked shaken. He held Guilt in the crook of his arm like a teddy bear of darkness. His lawyerly disguise was starting to unravel—blond curls were popping up on his clean-shaven scalp and patches of cargo pockets were erupting on his blue slacks. If their covers failed, Nico wasn’t sure if that would make them blend in less or more with the monstrous crowd.

The middle judge leaned forward, his Hades mask grinning at the telkhine. “What is your response, Morpho? If you do not answer, we will take your silence for acceptance.”

The telkhine whimpered. “I—I don’t know what to say! Some of those things…yeah, I did them.”

The crowd cheered. The judges banged their gavels, filling the room with a sound like the Fifth Cohort tap-dancing.

“But that was long ago!” Morpho wailed. “I have changed since then!”

Spectators gasped. Uneasy muttering rippled through the bleachers.

The judges sat forward with keen interest.

The one of the left, who wore the bearded satyr’s mask, asked in a dangerously calm tone, “In what ways have you changed?”

Will stifled a yelp. His eyes widened with terror. When Nico gave him a concerned look, Will mouthed *I know that voice*.

The crowd had fallen silent, waiting intently for the telkhine to answer.

Morpho’s wild eyes searched the onlookers’ faces. “Someone help me,” they said. “This is ridiculous!”

Nico was tempted to try. This whole scene enraged him. But there were too many enemies between him and the accused telkhine. The three demigods wouldn't stand a chance. Besides, they didn't yet understand what was happening, or where their friends had been taken.

"No one here will come to your aid," said the judge on the left. His voice was reedy and nasal, as if designed to whine. Nico was pretty sure he'd never heard it before. "Answer my question. How have you…*changed*?"

He spoke the last word with distaste. The question was some kind of trap, Nico realized. He wanted to yell to Morpho *Don't answer!*

Morpho let out a desperate sob. "You don't understand! I have been alive for nearly a thousand years. I've passed through so many cycles of regeneration—Tartarus to Earth and back again, over and over, killed, reborn, killed, reborn. Yes, I did all those things you mentioned! I thought that was my purpose…until one day I decided to choose something else. I've been in the mortal world for over a decade now, causing no harm to anyone. Why are you judging me after all this time?"

The judge on the right picked up her quill, speaking as she wrote. "*Decided to choose something else.* Can you elaborate?"

Don't, Nico thought.

There was a desperate gleam of hope in Morpho's eyes.

"I am a creator now, not a killer," they said. "I make *toys*. I have a very successful Etsy account. Just ask Fufluns, who lets me use his winery for my workshop!"

The audience erupted in a din of jeers, shouts, and boos. Under cover of the noise, Nico turned to Hazel. "Who the heck is Fufluns?"

She shook her head, too rattled to answer.

"Old Etruscan god of health and growth," Will murmured.

Nico stared at him.

"What?" Will protested. "I glow, I heal people, and I know things. That's what I do. And that judge on the left is—"

"Order!" The middle judge banged his gavel. "Order in the court! We have heard the accused freely confess his crime."

"No!" Morpho cried. "I just told you—I've changed! I'm not a monster anymore!"

A collective *ooooh* ran through the crowd. It was the same kind of sound spectators made when a professional athlete face-planted in front of a live television audience.

The three judges huddled briefly, conferring.

Fake Hades stood. “This tribunal has decided. We find Morpho the telkhine guilty.”

“Guilty?” Morpho barked. “Of what, cannibalism? Body odor? I bathe *every day*! I’m a water mammal!”

“Guilty of change!” bellowed Fake Hades. “By your own admission, you forsook your natural purpose! Cannibalism, arson, murder, body odor, even interrupting an authority figure—these are commendable! They are in your nature as a monster. Until ten years ago, your official record was spotless. But now…making toys? Not bothering anyone? Running an Etsy account?”

The crowd booed and catcalled at the mention of such vile crimes.

“The Court of the Dead has been established to punish such deviant behavior,” said Fake Hades. “To return the world to its natural order! And you, Morpho, are irredeemable. It is our judgment that you shall be executed for your crimes in such a way that you will never regenerate in Tartarus, for this is a court of the *true* and *permanent* death!”

Wild cheering from the spectators. Two skeletal guards in red robes approached Morpho, lowering two-pronged spears at the accused.

Nico bolted to his feet. He couldn’t help it. This was *wrong*. But as he did so, Defiance tumbled from his lap. Without direct contact to his Puff, Nico’s head spun. The room seemed to tilt like a gyroscope—changing from a torchlit cavern to a mortal courtroom and then back again. Nico nearly fell over, but Hazel grabbed his hand and pulled him back down into his seat.

“You have to control yourself!” Hazel hissed. “We can’t fight this many.”

He knew she was right, but it was hard for him to restrain himself. He watched helplessly as the two skeletal guards thrust their double-pronged spears into Morpho’s chest.

Morpho let loose a terrible howl. Their body disintegrated from their sternum outward, flames reducing them to ash like they were made of flash paper.

Nico swallowed back a sob.

Morpho was gone.

As if that image hadn’t been horrible enough, the entire gallery broke out in thunderous applause, some hooting and pumping their fists as Morpho’s smoldering ashes floated down to the floor.

“We have to stop this,” Will said. “If they did this to our friends…”

Nico trembled with rage. He imagined Arielle, or poor little Quinoa, standing in this cavern, being jeered at, persecuted, and finally executed for daring to be different. And the demigods who promised to protect them had been nowhere in sight. Nico had failed the mythics. He had never felt so useless.

The gorgon-masked judge banged her gavel, trying to restore order.

“We should go,” said Nico through gritted teeth. “We can’t do this by ourselves. We’ll come back with the entire legion and—”

“Wipe this place off the map,” Hazel agreed, in a tone that made Nico glad she was on his side. “This is *wrong*.”

They started to rise, but the rest of the crowd was just finding their seats again, falling into silence. The demigods sat back down. They didn’t dare attract attention.

“Bring forth the next defendant!” ordered the middle judge.

“Wait until the crowd goes nuts again,” Will whispered. “Then I’ll stand up, and you two follow me….” Will’s voice faltered, his eyes fixed on the front of the courtroom. “Oh, *no…*”

Nico followed his gaze. The red-robed guards were prodding the next defendant forward, herded in shackles and chains before the judges’ bench. But this defendant Nico knew.

It was Asterion.

CHAPTER 22

Nico thought he was going to be sick. He watched the guards fasten Asterion's chains to an iron ring on the floor. Apparently, the judges hadn't been worried about Morpho the telkhine attacking them, but a seven-foot-tall bull-man was another matter.

Asterion stood tall and regal, like the Minoan prince he was. If the shackles bothered him, he did not show it. The spectators whispered and gawked at his gleaming horns, his powerful musculature, or maybe just the stitchwork on his blue kilt. Clearly, the monsters saw him as a celebrity.

Hazel touched Nico's knee. "Change of plans."

"Agreed," he whispered.

Will nodded. "We have to get him out of here."

"I have an idea," Hazel said. "Let me—"

She was interrupted by the judge's gavel. Fake Hades loomed over Asterion. Nico could almost feel the gloating that radiated from him.

"The Minotaur!" Fake Hades said, with great satisfaction. "Your trial begins now."

"I do not go by that title anymore," said the bull-man. "Address me by my name—Asterion—or do not address me at all."

The judge hesitated. Perhaps he'd been expecting more howling and thrashing, and less dignified insistence on proper titles. Fake Hades huddled with his fellow judges, and then faced the accused again.

"We will grant you this request, *Asterion*." He said the name like it was one of the defendant's offenses. "You are here before the court to stand trial for your crimes. My colleague will now read from your official record."

Gorgon Face unfurled a second scroll, which looked much, much longer than Morpho's had been.

She cleared her throat. "You have been—"

"And who are you?" asked Asterion.

The judge stopped. Nico expected her to pick up her quill and write *interrupting figures of authority*, but something about Asterion's composed demeanor seemed to unbalance her. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I would like to know who is accusing me of crimes."

The satyr-masked judge banged his gavel. "We will not tolerate—"

"It is only fair." Asterion raised his voice just loud enough to drown him out.
"No *respectable* judges would hide behind masks, would they?"

The crowd murmured uneasily. In Nico's lap, Defiance preened with approval. Asterion seemed to be taking a jab not only at this tribunal but at Hades's Underworld court as well.

The judges glanced at one another. This had obviously not been part of their script. They wanted a celebrity show trial, maybe with some wailing and gnashing of teeth. They hadn't anticipated being challenged on courtroom procedures. The spectators watched them intently, waiting to see how they would react.

At last, the judge on the left said, "Very well."

He rose, and Nico realized how painfully thin he was. His robes hung off his body like it was a giant coat hanger. He removed his golden satyr's mask, revealing a gaunt, haggard face with sunken eyes and a twisted mouth. He looked more like a prisoner than a judge—someone who'd been on hunger strike for a month and was really angry about it. "I am Tantalus, king of Phrygia, son of Zeus."

"Oh my gods," Will whispered. "I *thought* so. Nico, this was before your time, but—"

"I heard about him," Nico said.

When Nico had first arrived at Camp Half-Blood, the campers had still been complaining about their substitute camp-activities director from the summer before. In their infinite wisdom, the gods had decided to replace Chiron with Tantalus, the most notorious criminal from the Fields of Punishment, who'd tried to serve the gods a stew made up of his own son. For that, he'd been sentenced to be forever hungry and thirsty, unable to grasp any food or drink. Shocker: his tenure at camp hadn't gone very well, either.

"But why is he here?" Nico wondered.

Tantalus should have been back in the Fields of Punishment enjoying his eternal damnation, not in the San Francisco Superior Courthouse being all judgy.

The judge on the right stood next, removing her golden gorgon mask. She was a ruddy-faced red-haired woman with a shriveled mouth and sharp, malicious eyes that she trained on Asterion.

“I was once a powerful queen,” she said, “so I request that you refer to me as Your Majesty.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” says Asterion, unflustered. “But what is your name?”

“Mary,” she replied. “Mary Tudor.”

Nico’s mind couldn’t handle this. *Bloody Mary*, the queen of England who’d burned hundreds of Protestants at the stake? How was she allowed to sit in judgment over anyone?

He held his breath as the middle judge removed his mask. Given the other two judges’ identities, Nico expected him to be someone from the Top Ten All-Star Evil list, like Joseph Goebbels or Satan, but instead…Nico had no idea who he was.

He appeared much younger than the other two. He had a mop of dark hair, a finely trimmed beard, and fierce brown eyes. He looked like a haughty maître d’ at a fancy restaurant, whose only pleasure in life was turning away improperly dressed customers.

He regarded the bull-man with disdain. “Do you not recognize me, Asterion?”

“I do not.”

“You once fought my closest friend.” A horrible smile spread across the judge’s face. “Surely you remember Theseus.”

At the mention of the name of the man who once slew him, Asterion just snorted. “Is this some sort of joke? Theseus had no friends.”

“Oh, but he did!” the judge cried. “A friend of even greater ability and fame! A friend he envied and sought to emulate! I am he. The mighty Pirithous!”

Asterion did not even flinch. “Who?”

“Who?” Will whispered to Nico.

Many of the spectators were turning to each other and asking the same question.

Red splotches mottled Pirithous’s cheeks. “Enough!” He banged his gavel. “You are wasting our time, Asterion. You have met your judges. Now you will meet your fate!”

That had probably sounded better in Pirithous’s head. Instead of inspiring shock and awe, his words were mostly ignored by the crowd, who were still busy asking each other if they’d ever heard of Pirithous.

“Queen Mary!” cried Pirithous in a shriller voice. “Please read from the defendant’s official record!”

The judges sat, putting their grotesque masks back over their faces, which Nico considered an improvement.

Her Majesty cleared her throat. “Asterion, formerly known as the Minotaur, the court takes your past achievements into account. We note that you were born an abomination.”

The crowd made *ooh* noises, like they all wished *they’d* been born abominations.

“While you dwelt within the Labyrinth,” Mary continued, “you were responsible for the murder of fifty-six young men and maidens.”

This elicited polite applause from the spectators.

While Queen Mary listed more and more highlights from Asterion’s career—sowing fear and chaos, terrorizing children, stalking, violations of privacy, indecent exposure—Nico leaned closer to Hazel.

“So what are you thinking?” he whispered.

“The Mist,” she said softly. “I think I can at least confuse everyone here by casting a new illusion over the courtroom, but I won’t be able to maintain it very long. Do you think you and Will could free Asterion if I give you cover?”

Nico nodded, then leaned toward his boyfriend and told him their impromptu plan.

Will scanned the crowd, no doubt judging how many rows of monsters they’d have to pass to reach Asterion. “We can get him free,” he said grimly. “We have to.”

Pirithous’s gavel rang out again. “Asterion, you have heard a summary of your illustrious career. You were a monster’s monster. Your vile, bloody, and despicable deeds made you a role model to many here in this court.”

A lot of heads nodded in the crowd. Nico noted that a few of the ogres were clutching paper and pen, like they were hoping to get Asterion’s autograph before he was executed.

“Nevertheless,” continued Pirithous, “you turned your back on your own nature. You rose from Tartarus *unbidden*, inspiring others to follow your wicked example, all so you could take up a peaceful existence of”—he frowned at his notes, as if he couldn’t bring himself to speak something so horrible—“knitting.”

A collective gasp rose from the spectators.

Pirithous leaned forward, his Hades mask leering at the accused. “What possible defense could you offer for such a betrayal of monster-kind?”

Asterion stood still, staring back at the judge.

Pirithous snarled, “Did you hear me?”

“I did.”

“Then what is your defense?”

“I refuse to give one.”

The crowd gasped. Tantalus took over the gavel-banging. “Order in the court!” he screeched. “Order!”

Nico glanced at Hazel. “Now?”

Her eyes were closed, her face tight with concentration. She muttered under her breath as if chanting a spell.

“Wait,” she said. “Almost ready…”

Nico tried to control his nerves. He had no idea how much energy and focus it took to cast an illusion on a courtroom full of mythic creatures. All he knew was that they were running out of time.

Once the onlookers quieted down, Pirithous scoffed at Asterion. “Do you believe that you are not to be held accountable for what you have done?”

The bull-man shook his head. “I accept responsibility for my past actions. And I have done my best to change.”

“Then you admit you have tried to change! You think you can erase centuries of admirable atrocities and become a peaceful creature? You think it is within your rights to *knit*?”

Queen Mary cleared her throat. “Though it must be admitted, your stitchwork is very fine. My own ladies-in-waiting could not rival—”

“Mary!” cried Pirithous. “Not helping!”

Asterion crossed his arms. “You have no right to judge me. This entire proceeding is a farce.”

“Blasphemy!” cried a ghostly figure in the front row, waving his tricorn hat.

“Exssssssecute him!” called a nearby dracaena.

Pirithous raised a hand for silence. “Asterion, we are here to restore the natural order of things. This court has been formed as a bulwark against *exactly* your sort of degenerate behavior. Living in peace with mortals? Pursuing arts and crafts? Encouraging others to abandon their gods-given nature? No! If the gods will not intervene, *we will*. We will remind Olympus, the Underworld, and the realm of mortals that some lines are not meant to be crossed!”

He’d clearly been practicing that speech in the mirror, and it had the desired effect. The crowd leaped to its feet (and hooves and snake trunks), cheering wildly.

Hazel gripped Nico’s leg hard. *“Now!”* she said.

Nico rose, and the world tilted off-balance again. A wave of pressure rippled outward from Hazel’s seat, making Nico’s ears pop and his breath steam. Suddenly the cavern looked a thousand times bigger—a stadium ringed with tiers of bleachers, thousands of fans packed to the rafters, screaming ecstatically. Lights flashed and pulsated from the Jumbotron overhead. The noise hit Nico like a brick wall.

He and Will were standing on the floor of a massive concert, ten rows from the stage rail—about the same distance as they’d been from the judges’ bench. And on the stage, a band was rocking out. Two guitarists traded screaming electric leads. The drums thundered. The bass quickened Nico’s heartbeat. A row of background singers danced in matching blue sequined dresses. And in the center of the spotlights, a balding man with a white goatee and a blue silk suit sat at the piano, his hands flying across the ivories as he howled into his microphone. “I am an innocent man!”

Will froze. “This—this is Madison Square Garden!”

Nico tugged his hand. “Will, come on!”

“That’s Billy Joel!” Will said. “My mom opened for him once!”

“That’s great,” Nico said, panic rising in his throat, “but we’re not really here. We need to—”

“Right,” Will said, swaying in place. “My mom is…” He frowned. “Actually, I think she’s got a gig in San Francisco this week. Huh. But Billy Joel at the Garden!”

Under different circumstances, Nico would have been happy to indulge Will in an imaginary concert or hear about Naomi Solace’s music career. But they didn’t have time right then.

He gripped Will’s hand tighter and pulled him toward the stage, weaving around monsters and spirits who had suddenly found themselves at a different kind of spectacle. In a stroke of genius, Hazel had given the crowd imaginary smartphones, which monsters normally never had. They were ignoring everything—Nico and Will, the stage, their neighbors—as they held up their

phones to snap the perfect selfies, wave their flashlights, or capture video footage they would never watch again on their tiny screens.

Nico and Will made it five rows up before the illusion began to flicker. For a split second, they were back in the mortal courtroom, charging toward the judge's bench as a lawyer droned on about insurance limits. Then they were back in the Court of the Dead, the three masked judges all on their feet, Pirithous screaming, "Stop this! Who is doing this?"

Asterion turned toward Nico and Will, and his eyes widened. "My friends?"

Then they were back at the Billy Joel concert, pushing through a mass of dancing fans who blocked the aisle.

Nico drew his Stygian blade. The dark iron smoked whenever the lights hit it.

A wave of nausea rolled through him. It was too disorienting. He couldn't think. But they *had* to be close to Asterion, and Hazel couldn't keep up this illusion much longer.

"There!" screamed Pirithous, pointing in Hazel's direction. "Get her!"

The stage was now a jumble of realities. Queen Mary was standing on the mortal judge's bench. The Cyclops-at-arms was dancing with Billy Joel's backup singers. Tantalus had gotten into a fistfight with the lawyer from the civil trial, and Pirithous was trying to extricate himself from the drummer's wind chimes, which had gotten tangled in his robes. Pirithous pointed right at Hazel again, who was exactly as Nico had left her—in her seat in the court, her eyes closed, her lips moving as she muttered an incantation. The Mist formed an aura around her, much like the Iris-message of a tessera. She was the only fixed point in the chaos of sounds and images.

The red-robed skeletons noticed her. They lowered their twin-pronged spears and advanced.

"Will, hurry!" Nico pushed forward—and ran straight into Asterion's chest.

"Nico di Angelo!" Asterion said with both shock *and* joy. "Will Solace! You found me!"

"Someone stop these intruders!" Tantalus shouted. "Now!"

Nico brought his blade down on Asterion's chain. Iron sparked against iron. The restraint didn't quite break, but it was weakened enough for the bull-man to snap it with a tug of his arms. His limbs were still shackled together, but at least he wasn't anchored to the floor anymore.

Will began to glow. "Asterion, we're gonna get you out of here."

Unfortunately, one of the red guards had turned in their direction. He marched toward them while his companion continued to advance on Hazel.

Before Nico could think up a plan, the ghost with the tricorn hat flew at his face. “How dare you interrupt this proceeding! Do you hate *justice*?”

Nico grabbed him by the throat, which shut the ghost up. It had probably been centuries since a mortal had been able to make physical contact with him.

“I’m the Ghost King,” Nico said. “You don’t scare me.”

The spirit howled as he dissolved into smoke.

Nico felt pretty proud of himself until he heard Asterion grunt in pain behind him. He wheeled to find the bull-man on his knees, his hand pressed against a newly opened gash on his head, and the Cyclops-at-arms standing over him, her spiked club glistening with blood.

“No!” Will’s glow factor surged until he was brighter than the spotlights. The Cyclops roared and staggered, momentarily blinded, but even on a wild swing, her club was too big to miss. It caught Will’s shoulder and spun him around like a top.

“Will!” Nico rushed toward him, but it turned out that yelling wasn’t a good idea when a half-blind Cyclops was trying to pinpoint your location. The monster’s club swept Nico off his feet. He hit the floor, the breath knocked out of him. He looked up to see the Cyclops about to smash him in the face, when Pirithous shouted, “HOLD!”

Nico rolled to one side. He struggled to his feet. The backs of his legs where the Cyclops’s club had connected felt like they’d been gone over with a meat tenderizer. He limped over to Will, who was just sitting up, clutching his shoulder.

The Cyclops scowled. She was clearly displeased at not getting to bash Nico’s head in, but she continued to loom over them, just in case Pirithous changed his mind. One of the red-robed guards now stood with his spear pointed at Asterion. The other guard was prodding Hazel toward the bench. The Puffs had disappeared—perhaps fled to the safety of Will’s backpack.

The concert illusion had evaporated, as had the vestiges of the mortal courtroom. That left only Pirithous’s court, which was fast becoming Nico’s least-favorite reality.

Tantalus ripped off his satyr’s mask and leered down at the defeated demigods.

“Heroes,” he growled. “I thought I was done with your kind! Why are you always so *annoying*?”

Nico gripped the hilt of his sword. He calculated the odds of breaking through the crowd, but with his injured legs and Will’s injured shoulder, it was hopeless. Plus, the guard on Hazel was keeping his spear only inches from her back, and Nico had seen what that weapon could do.

Queen Mary tutted in disappointment. “*Heroes* should know better than to interrupt our righteous proceedings. What do you think you’re doing, young fools?”

“Trying to free our friend!” Will said.

Tantalus laughed. “*Friend?* That is the Minotaur! He nearly killed one of your *actual* friends a few years ago, did he not?”

“Enough!” called out Pirithous. “Suzanne, if any of these hooligans acts up again, you have permission to knock their brains out.”

The Cyclops-at-arms grinned. Somehow, the name Suzanne suited her. Up close, Nico could see that her lip gloss matched Asterion’s blood on her spiked club, which was some next-level color coordination.

“The spectators shall be seated and quiet!” Pirithous continued. “Or I will clear the court!”

The assembled monsters began to settle, some of them grumbling that they didn’t get to hear Billy Joel finish his song.

Asterion remained on his knees, listing to one side as he kept pressure on his head wound. Hazel met Nico’s eyes, silently asking *What now?* But Nico had no answer. Hazel looked drained from controlling the Mist. Will’s shoulder was probably dislocated at the very least. None of them were in any shape to fight an entire court. Maybe if Nico could stab Suzanne…

“Ah, Nico di Angelo,” Pirithous chided. “I see your devious mind at work. I warn you, do not test the court’s patience. You are even more outnumbered than you realize.”

He gestured at the front row. The only spectators still standing were three humanoids in gray robes. In fact, everything about them was gray—their skin, their eyes, their hair, their long, curly beards. They might have been carved from granite.

Nico had no idea who they were, but he didn’t like the way their stony faces sized him up, as if thinking of all the interesting ways they could dismantle him. He also didn’t like that there were three of them. Trios in the world of myth were always powerful, usually deadly, and sometimes godly.

Pirithous nodded with satisfaction. “Good. You begin to appreciate your situation. Never fear, Nico di Angelo. You will have your chance to testify. The Court of the Dead might even show leniency to you and your glowing companion, if you choose to cooperate. After all, you have brought us the criminal we wanted most!”

Nico assumed he meant Asterion. Then he realized Pirithous was smiling at Hazel.

“Praetor Levesque,” said Pirithous. “It’s nice to see you again.”

Nico felt like the floor had dropped out from under him.

Hazel looked stunned. “What did you say?”

Pirithous chuckled. “You don’t remember? No matter. This court is well acquainted with your crimes. A daughter of Pluto, harboring fugitives from the Underworld!”

Asterion struggled to rise. “You will not harm my friends.”

But Suzanne was more than a match for his strength. She pushed him back to his knees.

Mary Tudor sniffed in disgust. “Why is the Minotaur still here? Haven’t we sentenced him to death yet?”

Tantalus frowned. “I suppose we haven’t. All in favor?”

“Death,” agreed Pirithous.

“Death,” confirmed the queen.

“NO!” Nico yelled.

But it was too late. The red-robed guard jabbed his spear at Asterion, and the bull-man began to crumble and smoke.

“Asterion!” Will sobbed.

The bull-man clutched at his chest, as if that might stop the process. His large brown eyes gleamed with pain, but he managed to speak: “Th-thank you for trying, my demigod friends. You have given me faith that…that, one day, those like me will be accepted.”

Then a web of fire raced across his body, and the gentle giant disintegrated into ash.

Nico’s vision blurred with tears. He couldn’t bear the weight of his despair. Another friend gone. Taken from him. And he had just let it happen.

“Nico!” Will cried. “Nico, look at me.”

He couldn’t. He feared that once he looked at his boyfriend’s face, his entire world would shatter. He heard Hazel crying nearby. The smell of cinders cloyed his nostrils.

Asterion was gone. Gone.

“Nico, *please*.”

Will cupped Nico’s jaw with his good hand and gently turned his face. Will’s eyes swam with tears, but there was a fierce determination in them, a light that refused to go out.

“We will get out of here,” he said. “Believe it.”

“Touching,” Pirithous muttered. Then he motioned for the other judges to take their seats.

“Moving along,” Pirithous continued, “as we have several more cases on the docket before we can break for lunch.” He gave Hazel another cold smile. “We thank Will Solace and Nico di Angelo for the gift they have brought us—this architect of depravity, who is even more responsible for the breakdown of the natural order than Asterion! Her punishment will help our cause in ways you can’t even dream of. If my colleague would do the honors…”

Mary Tudor gazed upon Hazel with a resolute smugness, and then she pulled a scroll from her robe.

“Hazel Levesque,” she said, a blood-chilling smirk on her face, “your trial begins now.”

"*My* trial?"

The words seemed to snap Hazel out of her daze. Nico watched as the grief on her face transformed into rage. She reached for her spatha, but she had no chance with the red-robed guard's spear at her back.

So Nico raised the dead.

The floor splintered at his feet. Dozens of bony arms emerged from the crevice. But if he'd been hoping to cause a panic, he was disappointed.

Pirithous glanced at the undead wriggling forth and then waved his gavel lazily at the three gray men in the front row of the gallery. "Nice try. Take care of it, Dis."

The gray man on the left, whose beard hung down to his waist, raised his hand and made a swatting gesture. Nico's undead instantly turned to dust.

"What?" cried Nico. *"How?"*

The gray man's mouth twitched. "The youth are so uneducated. Do you honestly not know who we are?"

Will sized them up like he was imagining lighting their beards on fire. "Sorry. Can't say we do."

"We are the di inferi," said the man on the left, whom Nico assumed was Dis.

"Gods of the Underworld," the middle guy chimed in. "We predate your Pluto by *centuries*, but apparently, people forgot about us when human sacrifice went out of style a few thousand years ago. The ungrateful wretches. I am Februus."

"And I am Mors," said the third god. "The personification of Death."

Nico thought that was probably the least-engaging answer he'd ever heard to the icebreaker question *So, what do you do for a living?*

Nevertheless, the presence of these three gray beings made him feel even more helpless.

"Yes," said Pirithous, apparently reading his expression. "You see that your parlor tricks are worthless here, Nico di Angelo." He turned toward the godly trio. "And don't worry, Februus. We will bring back the old ways, as they were meant to be practiced!"

“I’m counting on it,” grumbled Februus. “Call me old-fashioned—there’s no sacrifice like a human sacrifice!”

His two companions muttered in agreement.

Hazel seemed to have forgotten about her sword—because conversations about human sacrifice can be distracting—but she tightened her grip on its hilt when Pirithous addressed her. “And so, *Hazel Levesque*, here we are.”

She scowled. “How do you know me? Why are you doing this?”

“Two questions! With answers that *should be* obvious! But let’s start with the latter.” Pirithous spread his arms, letting the sleeves of his robe spill down like inky curtains. “There is no longer any real justice in the world. We are determined to bring it back.”

Nico sighed. “What does that even *mean*? You just executed our friend! And for *what*?”

“Do you deny reality?” Pirithous demanded. “*Monsters* are only created to cause misery and suffering—to give you so-called heroes something to prove yourselves against. That is their *purpose*. If they do not serve their purpose, they need to be corrected!”

“Corrected?” Hazel cried. “Asterion *died*! You *killed* him!”

Pirithous waved a finger in her face. “It’s remarkable how *little* you understand, girl.”

Hazel blinked. Her gaze fell on the pile of ashes left from the bull-man’s demise. “You mean…”

Nico wasn’t sure what she was thinking, but Pirithous didn’t give him time to speculate.

“I mean *the court knows best*!” he cried, eliciting a new round of applause from the gallery. “We have a plan, unlike *some*. We respect tradition, unlike *some*. Monsters should be feared!”

Cheers from the monsters in the audience.

“Gods should be worshipped!”

The gray trio of death gods applauded politely. Nico was unnerved to see that half a dozen other audience members were also clapping—all minor gods? Nico hadn’t been surrounded by so many deities since Tartarus. He didn’t like what that meant for their chances of survival.

“And heroes,” continued Pirithous. “*True* heroes should be rewarded!”

He bowed to his audience as his fellow judges banged their gavels and shouted, “Hear, hear!”

Hazel scowled, clearly unimpressed. “And you three—you consider yourself true heroes?”

“Of course!” said Tantalus. “In my case, the gods had forgotten their own rules of hospitality. They would not share their ambrosia and nectar. I tried, in my own gentle way, to show them their error—”

“By killing your son, roasting him, and serving him to the Olympians,” Nico recalled.

“The details are not important,” scoffed the judge. “I should have been rewarded for my piety. Instead, I was punished. A rigged trial! A complete sham and mockery of justice!”

Queen Mary nodded in her grotesque gorgon mask. “And I should have ruled over a new golden age of England. My piety was unmatched.”

“Complete with burnt human offerings,” Februus said approvingly from the front row.

“And I,” Pirithous said, “as everyone here can appreciate, was the greatest demigod of my generation!”

This was met with awkward silence from the gallery. Apparently, Pirithous chose to take this as a gesture of respect.

“Yes, I know!” he continued. “I was overshadowed by my friend Theseus. Not his fault, of course, but I was always the greater man with the greater ambitions! My reward?” He turned his Fake Hades mask toward Nico. “Well…I’m sure your father has told you the story.”

“Sorry,” Nico said. “He never mentioned you.”

It probably wasn’t the wisest thing to say. Pirithous waved his gavel at Nico’s face. “This is the problem. *Exactly.* The Olympian gods have forgotten themselves! They need to be reminded of the proper order of things! And the only way to do that is to show them, to make it painfully obvious, just how *wrong* things have become.”

Will frowned at the tribunal. “And you’re the ones to do that? If you’re following the natural order, shouldn’t you all be in the Underworld…you know, dead?”

Pirithous snickered. “Why don’t *you* answer that, Hazel Levesque? Because you should be dead, and yet here you are, alive and well.”

She gaped at him. “I— That isn’t fair.”

“I agree!” He threw his hands in the air. “It *isn’t* fair. Why were you allowed to leave the Underworld? What about all the other souls in the Fields of Asphodel who would want a second chance? What makes *you* so special? Just the fact that you’re a daughter of Pluto, saved by a son of Hades, so the rules don’t apply to you, you *necro-babies*?”

“Shut *up*!” Nico yelled. He inadvertently raised a few more skeletons from the cracks in the floor.

The god Mors snapped his fingers and the undead disintegrated. “You need to control your temper, young man.”

“I saved her because she’s my sister,” Nico growled. “But also because I knew she didn’t belong there. The fact that she still had memories of her life was evidence enough!”

“Oh, I see,” Pirithous replied. “We judges all have memories of our past lives—searing, painful memories of the ways we were denied our proper due. By your logic, that makes us worthy of saving, does it not?”

Hazel gasped. “I remember you now. You were the man stuck in that boulder in the Fields of Asphodel. I used to drift past you all the time! You never stopped whining.”

Nico frowned. *The man stuck in a boulder?* That rang no bells for him, but Pirithous laughed with delight.

“Finally!” he cried. “Finally she remembers! But I can assure you, Hazel Levesque, I have stopped whining. I have started to *act*. Queen Mary, if you would, please read from the defendant’s official record.”

The queen unfurled the scroll dramatically across the desk. “We note that the accused did many heroic things in the war against Gaea. She rose to a place of honor in the Twelfth Legion. She has acted as a true hero on occasions too numerous to mention. Unfortunately, all this was done *after* her illegal return from the Underworld, and so her deeds must be struck from the record.”

Hazel choked. “Are you serious?”

“Prior to her death,” Mary Tudor went on, “the defendant was weak and easily manipulated—by her own mother, and by Gaea. At the time of Hazel Levesque’s death, she could not rightly be considered a hero.”

“That simply isn’t true!” said Will, his face red with anger. “I know her story! Hazel has always been—”

“Mind your tongue, Will Solace,” Pirithous snapped, “or you will lose it.” He glanced over at Mary Tudor. “Please continue.”

The queen cleared her throat. “As I said, since her illegal return, Hazel Levesque has behaved mostly in a heroic manner…until recently, when she aided and abetted other fugitives from the Underworld, namely the Minotaur and his followers, in trying to escape their gods-given

purpose. She has set a dangerous example, suggesting that monsters and demigods can live in harmony!"

A surge of catcalls and boos rose from the crowd.

Pirithous banged his gavel. "Well, I have heard enough. Hazel Levesque, do you have any defense to offer?"

"Yes," she said. "This whole trial is a joke."

"AND YOU SHOULDN'T BE ALIVE!" Pirithous bellowed. His voice echoed so loudly that all the gossiping and murmuring in the courtroom stopped.

Pirithous took a deep breath. He conferred briefly with his fellow judges and then faced Hazel once more.

"The court has made its decision," he said. "Hazel Levesque, it is our judgment that you shall be executed in such a way that your soul shall never return to the world of living. But do not despair. Your punishment shall help our cause in ways that should be a great comfort to you!"

The red-robed guard circled in front of Hazel, readying his spear.

"No!" Will shouted. His body flared like a supernova, filling the cave with blinding light. Nico squeezed his eyes shut, but the afterimage of Will's shape still burned there in the darkness. Spectators screamed. The judges banged their gavels furiously.

Nico knew this was his chance. He blinked rapidly, desperate to clear his vision, and called out, "Cocoa Puffs, to me!"

Never since Pandora opened her pithos had so many emotions exploded from a container so quickly. In the back row, Will's backpack burst in a shrapnel cloud of canvas, nylon, and Kit Kat bars, unleashing a tiny cavalry of darkness. The cacodemons swarmed over the rows of spectators, jumping from shoulder to shoulder, head to head, causing even more confusion in the crowd of half-blind monsters as the Puffs triggered every emotion from rage to despair.

Nico swung his sword, slicing the Cyclops Suzanne across her thighs—not a lethal strike, but painful enough to make her howl in surprise and drop her club. Will turned on the nearest skeletal guard, grabbed the shaft of his spear, and screamed in the skeleton's face, blasting the guard with such intense light that he blew apart in a bleached-white swirl of dust.

The Cocoa Puffs arrived, bouncing around Nico's feet and chittering proudly as if to say *Dad, we did a thing!*

"Let's get out of here!" Will yelled. "Shadow-travel!"

Nico grabbed his hand and started toward Hazel.

She was only twenty feet away. They could do this.

He'd barely taken a step when the second red-robed guard grabbed Hazel's throat with one hand and lifted her off her feet. The other hand pinned Hazel's spatha against her side.

"No, Nico di Angelo!" cried Pirithous. "You can't stop the wheels of justice!"

The trio of death gods were in motion now, their eyes fixed on Nico. The monsters in the gallery were beginning to recover from their shock. They howled for blood.

Hazel caught Nico's eye. She looked strangely calm, which terrified him.

"Go!" she croaked. "Nico, don't believe it."

The red guard jabbed her with his spear. Hazel cried out, and the entire cavern shook. Precious gems rained from overhead—more riches than Nico had ever seen Hazel summon from the earth, burying the courtroom under a hailstorm of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

Nico screamed as his sister disappeared, her form burning into ash and fire. Gems kept falling—smashing the skulls of monsters, forcing the judges to hide under their bench, causing howls of rage and pain. The ceiling began to crack. Nico glanced up in time to see an entire stalactite hurtling toward him like a diamond-encrusted ballista bolt.

In utter despair, he gripped Will's hand and dove into the nearest shadow, and the world melted to darkness.

CHAPTER 24

Don't believe it.

As Nico came to, Hazel's words floated through his head.

His hands pressed against cold concrete. The thrum of traffic filled his ears. The air smelled of eucalyptus. Someone was tugging on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Nico!" Will's voice sounded far away. "Nico, get up!"

Don't believe it, Hazel had said.

Then fire and ash.

Nico was crying. He reached out with his senses, trying to locate his sister's life force. He felt nothing.

"I know," said Will, his voice cracking. "But we can't do anything for her right now. We have to tell Frank."

Nico managed to sit up.

They had shadow-traveled back to where they'd started—the sentry post outside the Caldecott Tunnel. Deion and Yazan were still on duty, staring down at Nico with shocked expressions.

In a single morning, in less time than one changing of the guards, Nico's world had turned inside out. Asterion…gone. Hazel…

He wanted to scream. He wanted to summon every restless soul from the Underworld—to rip apart the entire East Bay until there was nothing left but overturned earth and roaming skeletons. But he barely had the energy to stand, even with Deion and Yazan's help.

The Cocoa Puffs swarmed him, hissing and growling in agitation. Will pulled him into a fierce hug.

Nico buried his face in the crook of his boyfriend's neck. Will's whole body trembled as they both sobbed. Nico could smell traces of soot and smoke in his hair.

Nico tried again to reach out for Hazel—to see if he could feel the ripples that her death should have caused.

He had lost so very many people over the years, he'd become adept at sensing when someone important to him had died.

But this time he felt nothing.

Please not her, he prayed. *Please not again*.

Darkness swirled at the edge of his consciousness. He wanted to pass out, to give in to it, but Will was there, holding him up. Nico pulled back just enough to study Will's face. He looked so angelic in that moment, his eyes pleading and concerned.

"Wait." Will sniffled, then rummaged in the pockets of his cargo pants. He produced a chocolate chip cookie. "Eat."

Nico wanted to refuse. How could he think of food? But his body had its own ideas. He wolfed down the cookie in three bites.

"What happened?" Yazan's voice was filled with dread. "Where's Hazel?"

Nico's and Will's faces must have told him all he needed to know. Yazan's expression hardened.

"Deion, use the tessera," ordered Will. "Call Frank. *Now.*"

If Deion said anything else, Nico didn't hear it. He collapsed against Will and sank back into a bottomless void.

His dreams fluctuated.

First, he was stuck in that room again, with someone knocking at the door, but this time the space was brighter than Will's energy—brighter than the sun itself. He kept his eyes shut. Still the glow burned through his eyelids, searing his retinas. He heard the door open. That was a first. But he couldn't bring himself to look.

He sensed her approach—a shift in the light, a coolness in the air. She drifted toward him. Her fingers caressed his face as lightly as the whiskers of a cat.

"Brother," she said, "why did you leave me?"

"I'm right here, Hazel!"

The light made it impossible to look. He wanted to reach out, to take her hand, but his arms remained frozen at his sides.

“I can’t find you!” She sounded farther away now. And her voice was no longer Hazel’s.

It had been months since he’d last heard his big sister speak, when his father had granted him a final chance to say good-bye to her.

“Bianca!” he cried. “Help me. Tell me what to do!”

“You were supposed to help *me*,” she said.

Somehow the voice became both Hazel’s and Bianca’s—a blend of their gentle tones. Nico tried to distinguish Hazel’s slight Southern lilt from Bianca’s softer consonants, a remnant of her Venetian accent, but he couldn’t. He realized it didn’t matter. His sisters shared one voice and one fate. He had failed them both.

Next, he found himself lounging in a grassy field on a warm afternoon. Cherry trees swayed overhead, their branches heavy with white-and-pink blooms. A few feet away, an expanse of water shimmered in the sunlight. The opposite shore was so far away it might have been a lake or a bay, but Nico recognized where he was—the Potomac River, the park where his mother had taken them in Washington, DC, during those first few weeks in America, before the fire that destroyed their lives.

A picnic basket sat between him and Bianca. She was reading her well-worn copy of *Anne of Green Gables* for the millionth time. As usual, she wore wide-legged trousers and a polo shirt, the way she preferred to dress whenever she was out of school. Her feet were bare, of course.

Their mother knelt beside the wicker basket, rummaging for something inside. The older version of Nico, the one who was dreaming, wanted to focus on her, to memorize the details of her face that had faded over the decades. She was wearing a blue gingham dress, and her dark hair was tied back in a bow. She hummed an Italian tune, maybe “Vivere”—“To Live”—because even Nico’s dreams had a dark sense of irony.

Her face, however, was hazy on the edge of his vision. The younger Nico, the boy in the dream, was mostly ignoring her as he shuffled through his Mythomagic deck. Finally he found the card he’d been searching for: Hades. He held it up and studied it in the light.

“Nico, did you remember to pack the fresh mozzarella?” his mother asked.

Younger Nico didn’t answer. He was too busy staring at the dark-robed figure on his card. The god reclined on an onyx throne. An iron helmet rested on his knee. His face was half-drowned in shadow, but he seemed to be peering sternly out at Nico, as if asking *Why do you come before me?*

Nico wondered what life would be like if all the gods and monsters were real. Would it be as exciting as Mythomagic made it seem?

“Nico!” His mother cursed in Italian. “Che cosa stai faccendo? You packed your figurines?”

She pulled a Mythomagic statuette from the picnic basket. Nico saw that she had pricked her finger on one of its sharp points as she was searching for the mozzarella.

Nico had never seen this game piece before, but he knew exactly what it was: Hazel in her final moments, just before the two-pronged spear touched her and reduced her to ashes. The miniature Hazel held her spatha up high, and now a drop of Maria di Angelo’s blood glistened on its point.

His dream changed again. He and Will were descending the stairs to the Underworld, as they’d done months ago on their quest to Tartarus.

Will stopped and frowned. “I’m having déjà vu. Weren’t we just here?”

This time, Nico could grasp the edges of the dream. Nausea washed over him as he tried to reconcile the different layers of reality.

“Ugh,” he muttered under his breath. “I want to wake up.”

“Wake up from what?” Will asked.

“I’m in the middle of a dream.”

“You mean *we’re* in a dream, right? Because I could swear this stretch of steps keeps repeating itself.”

“That too,” Nico said, his head throbbing. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, everything matters.” Will grabbed Nico’s wrist so tightly it hurt. “You can’t ignore what you’ve done, Nico.”

Suddenly, the underground passageway turned darker. *Much* darker.

Nico focused on his boyfriend’s face…but it was now hidden behind a golden mask, a grotesque, leering caricature of Will Solace.

Nico lurched away. His foot missed a step. He tumbled backward, spinning in the void while Will’s malevolent laughter echoed in his ears.

Nico awoke abruptly.

Fear was cuddled against his face, its hedgehog-like spines digging into his cheek.

He sat up, his mind still swimming through the images from his dreams. He wanted to believe the nightmares had been caused by the Puff, but he suspected that wasn’t true. Fear had found him, snuggled up to him, because it had sensed Nico needed him. It seemed to be sending him a message: *This is my emotion you are feeling. Recognize it. Embrace it. I will help.*

The cacodemons were more complex than Nico had given them credit for. He should talk to Hazel….

That’s when reality came crashing back over him.

Hazel was gone.

He sat bolt upright, frightening his Puff so badly that it leaped off the bed.

“Sorry,” he told it, rubbing the spine marks on his face.

Fear bounded away and joined its siblings, who were all curled up on the next bunk over. Will wasn’t there. Nico was alone in the guest barracks, with no memory of how he’d gotten there. He was glad the Romans were used to hard work, because they seemed to be spending a lot of their time dragging his unconscious body back to bed.

Hazel…He closed his eyes and tried once more to sense her life force.

He remembered the vacancy he'd felt when Jason died—like a piece of the universe had been hacked away with a dull knife. This didn't feel the same. Instead of emptiness, there was a distant pain, deep and aching, and it had a shape.

Don't believe it, she had said.

Nico tried to hold on to that glimmer of hope. She *must* be alive. Otherwise, he would fall apart, and too many people still needed him—Will, Frank, and the other mythics.

But he also worried. Was he being delusional? Was his hope overriding his instincts as a child of Hades?

Nico's stomach grumbled. One thing about being alive: his body didn't care how sad he was. It wanted food.

He headed to the bathroom to freshen up and change clothes. He grabbed his bomber jacket but froze when he found a four-inch gash on the left sleeve. The black leather had been ripped open—maybe by a nail on Suzanne's club, or by a falling stalactite. Nico had no memory of it happening. The inner wool lining sprouted from the tear like dandelion fuzz.

White-hot hatred surged through him—for Pirithous and his court, for all the misery they'd caused. A ripped sleeve was nothing compared to losing Hazel, of course. But this jacket had been with him through so many adventures. It had come out unscathed every time. Until now. It seemed like a bad omen.

Nico fought back tears.

She isn't dead, he told himself. *And jackets can be mended.*

But that just made him think of Asterion and his knitting needles, which made him even sadder.

He headed outside, leaving his Cocoa Puffs snoozing on Will's bunk.

It was early in the evening. The last rays of sunlight stretched over the Via Principalis. The camp felt strangely empty. Nico supposed dinner had already happened. Maybe the cohorts were off training or hunkered down in their barracks. The few campers he passed froze when they saw him, as if torn between wanting to say something and wanting to run away. Nico spared them the choice. He kept walking, his eyes fixed on the mess hall.

Word of Hazel's fate must have spread through the legion by now.

Did they blame Nico for not saving her?

He heard Mr. D's voice in his mind, reminding him to stay in the present. *Don't think about the past you can't change. Don't leap forward to a future you can't predict.*

The mess hall was empty except for a few wind spirits cleaning up from dinner, but the scent of roast beef still lingered in the air. Despite all his problems, Nico's mouth watered. He headed to the galley and managed to liberate some leftovers—a roast beef sandwich, some chips, and an apple (because healthy). He headed for the praetors' table, though the sight of Hazel's empty chair made him tear up again.

He sat down, and then took a deep breath. "She isn't dead," he said aloud this time.

"Are you sure?" said a voice at his ear.

Nico flinched.

It was Semele, of course. As Nico steadied his jumpy nerves, he thought how fortunate the eidolon was to be non-corporeal. If she'd had a physical form, she would've gotten an elbow in the face several times a day, the way she liked to sneak up on people.

"Semele," he said. "Sorry. I'm…a little jumpier than usual."

"Apologies, my child." Her smoky essence drifted to the right, taking the spot where Will usually sat. "I was hoping to find you."

Nico took a bite of his sandwich. "I assume someone told you what happened."

"Your boyfriend did," she confirmed, her voice heavy. "We were just speaking in the principia with Frank. He thinks Hazel is alive. Do you?"

Nico's heart ached yet again. On top of everything else, he'd slept through the day, putting the burden on Will to explain what had happened and deal with the reactions from Frank and the rest of the legion. Gods…Frank must be devastated.

"I'm not sure what to believe," Nico said. "As a child of Hades, I can usually sense when someone I care about has died. But with Hazel, I don't feel that. So maybe…" He didn't finish, not wanting to jinx anything.

"Will Solace believes the same thing," Semele said. "That Hazel is still alive somehow. And what of Asterion?"

Nico frowned. Another thing to feel guilty about—it hadn't even occurred to him to try to sense the bull-man's death. *Could* he sense the passing of a mythic? Their essence would return to Tartarus, which wasn't exactly like a soul being sent to Erebos, his father's kingdom. And then there was the fact that Pirithous had claimed Asterion would be executed in a way that prevented him from ever regenerating. How could that be?

He closed his eyes and tried to find Asterion. He remembered the bull-man's gentle hug on his last night in camp, his dignified attitude before the court, and yes, even the pride he had taken in his hand-knitted underwear.

Nico sensed nothing.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know. I don't suppose…" He was hesitant to get Semele's hopes up, but he decided to ask anyway. "That little patch of Tartarus ground you have growing in your quarters…?"

"Alas, no." Semele sighed. "We checked it as soon as we heard, to see if perhaps Asterion's essence had lodged within it, waiting to regrow. But our small piece of home is still struggling to take root in the upper world. We are not even certain it will survive."

Nico wasn't surprised, but the news made his sandwich sit uneasily in his gut.

"I want to believe Hazel and Asterion are alive," he said. "But if so, where are they?"

"I do not know," said the eidolon. "But I would like to offer the services of those of us who remain. Orcus, Johan, myself…We will help you."

He raised an eyebrow, surprised at the change in Semele's attitude. Only a day ago, she'd been ready to leave camp and take her chances in the wider world.

"That's…Thank you, Semele," he said. "I just wish I knew how you could help."

"We will discover this together," she said. Then she hesitated. "I regret that I was so ready to leave. I am sorry to have spoken harshly to Asterion. I have many doubts, Nico di Angelo. After living as long as I have, I cannot but fear the worst from others. But Asterion gave me *hope*, which I have not felt in centuries. I have not been allowed this level of independence in a long, long time."

Nico wished he could see Semele's face…if eidolons had faces. Her voice reminded him of his nonna in Venice, almost a century before. Nico remembered little about his grandmother's face, but he knew she'd lived through wars, famines, and plagues. She'd seen entire nations rise and fall. She'd lost her husband, three of her children, and her home four times to floods, bombs, and fire. And yet just before Nico left for the United States, with the storm clouds of World War II on the horizon, she had hugged him fiercely and said, "Ce la farai." A simple statement, difficult to translate into English: *You will make it. You will manage. You will be able to handle it.* Somehow, she'd had absolute faith that Nico would be okay.

Semele spoke with that same tone—a combination of sorrow and steel—and the eidolon had been alive for thousands of years longer than his nonna.

“Can I ask you something?” Nico said. “When we first met, you said you hadn’t possessed anyone in a long time. What made you stop?”

Semele’s smoke swirled and twisted. “Gaea used us as tools. We eidolons did her bidding and nothing else. After centuries upon centuries of subjugation, I lost touch with who I was.”

She drifted across the table like a miniature fog bank, settling over Hazel’s chair. “Possessing someone is not as simple as changing places, Nico di Angelo, or putting on a costume. When an eidolon inhabits another person’s body, we lose a bit of ourselves. We become weaker, more diluted, less visible. It is…the price we pay.”

Nico shivered. He’d always thought of possession as a kind of violation—a power move by an evil spirit over a helpless victim. He’d never considered that it also diminished the possessor.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t imagine what that’s like.”

“But you are helping, Nico. Every day that I make choices for myself, I become more myself.”

He couldn’t see Semele, but he imagined her smiling. He wondered what the Court of the Dead would say about her “official record.” She had chosen not to be a pawn of the gods, not to do the one thing eidolons were created to do. But that was making her more truly herself…whoever she had been when she lived as a mortal.

“Do you remember your life?” he asked.

“Mmm. It is more like the memory of a memory…a groove I have worn in my mind. I do not know if that makes sense.”

Nico nodded. He’d worn a few grooves in his mind, too.

“I was once royalty,” she said. “The details are fuzzy, but I know I became too proud of my beauty and power. I demanded something of Zeus himself, and…it did not go well. Someday, perhaps, if I regain enough of who I was, I will ask forgiveness of the person I hurt the most—my son.”

Nico wasn’t sure he’d understood her correctly. Her son?

Before he could ask, the doors of the mess hall creaked open.

“Ah,” said Semele. “Your boyfriend and Praetor Zhang have arrived.”

Sure enough, Will and Frank were making their way toward him. They both looked exhausted. Will’s shoulders drooped. Frank had bags under his eyes.

“Hey, Nico,” Frank said, collapsing in the nearest chair. “Hope you got some sleep.”

He sounded glum and angry at the world, but not devastated, at least. Will must have shared his theory that Hazel was still alive.

Will kissed the top of Nico's head and then sat next to him. "We have some things to discuss with you."

Uh-oh, thought Nico. Out loud he said, "Yeah, Semele and I were just talking."

"Good evening, demigods," said Semele. "Have you made any progress on your plan?"

Nico looked to Will. "You have a plan?"

"A potential one," said Will. "Assuming, well—"

"Hazel is alive," Nico said. "She has to be."

Will nodded. "What she said at the end—that *has* to mean something."

Frank rubbed his eyes. "You have no idea how much I want that to be true, but I need to hear every detail—Nico, from your point of view this time."

Nico recounted what had happened in the courtroom. It was hard not to choke up as he described how Asterion and Hazel had been reduced to ashes.

"She told us to go," Nico said. "And at the very end, she said *Don't believe it*."

Will and Frank exchanged a look. Clearly, they'd already been discussing this.

"Before that," Frank said, "this judge Pirithous…He said Asterion and Hazel would be"—he grimaced—"executed in a way that helped their plan?"

"Whatever that means," Nico agreed. "And in a way that they wouldn't be able to come back from."

Frank clawed the table with his fingertips. Nico hadn't seen Frank shape-shift into an animal in quite a while. He assumed Frank still had that ability. But even in human form, Frank's big hands reminded him of a grizzly's paws.

"Hazel could see—*can* see through the Mist better than anyone I know," Frank said. "It's possible she saw something in the way Asterion disintegrated, or she realized something about it afterward, that told her this turn-to-ash moment wasn't death. It was something else."

"There's a precedent," Will said. "Years ago, Percy's mom was turned into a golden burst of dust"—he glanced sheepishly at Semele—"by Asterion, actually. But she wasn't killed. Hades transported her to the Underworld."

Semele made a sound like she was clearing her throat. (Which made Nico wonder if eidolons even *had* throats to clear.) “You believe our friends were taken to the Underworld, then? Do these judges have such power?”

Nico stared at his half-eaten apple. “I’m not sure about the Underworld. We don’t know enough about the judges, or their purpose, but they had half a dozen minor gods in that court. If Hazel and Asterion were taken somewhere…”

“They could still be alive,” Semele said. “Perhaps Quinoa and Arielle, too. I am not familiar with this Pirithous, but I can ask Johan to search the archives. Perhaps he can find out more. Or any mention of this court.”

“Good idea,” said Frank. “In the meantime, we’ll get our strike team ready.”

Nico felt an electric charge pass through his body. “Strike team?”

“We’re getting our people back,” Frank said. “A small group of our most versatile fighters—” When Nico started to protest, Frank raised his hand. “This is going to be a rescue operation, not a pitched battle. Bringing the entire legion would be too unwieldy. Besides, we don’t have enough coverage for everyone.”

“Coverage?” Nico asked.

Will smiled. “That’s my contribution to the plan. With your permission, of course. My idea is Wearable Cocoa Puffs.”

Nico’s mouth fell open. “Wearable…like *accessories*?”

“They’ve helped us see through the Mist,” Will reminded him. “They seem to heighten our senses, right? So why not train the mythics and a few other legionnaires to use them without getting overwhelmed? We could use every advantage we can get.”

“That’s not a terrible idea,” Nico said.

Will gave him a mock bow, like *You flatter me.*

“Besides,” Will said, “if we have extra Puffs, they’re great for throwing at our enemies. We’ve seen that they can confuse even gods.”

“Just what we need,” Frank grumbled. “More confusion.”

“Frank, it’s *something*,” said Will.

“I know, I know. I just hate this feeling. I trust my bow, my sword, even my ability to turn into a mountain lion. But trusting cacodemons that none of us understand, when Hazel could be…”

“She’s not gone,” Nico assured him. “Remember how I *knew* Jason was dead? This isn’t the same, Frank. She’ll be okay. We have to hold on to that.”

“And the others,” Semele added dryly. “Asterion, Arielle, Quinoa.”

“Of course,” Nico said. “We’ll rescue them all.”

Semele drifted back across the table and hovered at Will’s shoulder. “Very well. This leaves us with a few small questions. When do we go? Where are we going? And what do we do when we get there?”

Nico smirked. He suspected that eidolons could get away with such a high level of snark because they were impossible to strangle.

“It’s true, we’re in the dark here,” he admitted. “I’m tempted to leave right now. I’m terrified of what kind of danger our friends might be in. But we need at least some time for our team to get used to the Cocoa Puffs. I suggest we train all day tomorrow and leave in the evening. Unless I sense something in the meantime that, uh, changes the time frame….”

He didn’t elaborate on what that might mean. Frank’s expression darkened, but he nodded in agreement.

“That seems wise,” Semele said. “Making decisions from a place of fear is not advisable.”

Frank wiped at his reddened eyes. “In terms of where we go…Unless we get a different lead from Johan’s research, we should start at the courthouse. And once we get there…”

There was no way to finish that. There were too many unknowns. But Nico imagined some of the thoughts running through Frank’s head. He suspected the wrath of Frank Zhang was going to make the court sorry they’d ever picked up their gavels.

“Tomorrow, then,” said Semele. “The mythics will be ready.”

Her smoky form dissolved, leaving the three demigods in an uncomfortable silence. Nico looked at Frank and Will and wondered if either of them had gotten any sleep that day.

Knowing them…probably not.

“We need to rest,” he said.

Will opened his mouth to speak, but Nico held up a finger. “Yes, I’m well aware that *I’m* the one telling us to rest.”

“How dare you kill my joke before I could tell it,” said Will.

Frank's eyes were still glassy and red. "I just wish I could talk to her," he said, his voice breaking. "If I could have some sort of proof that she's alive…"

An idea formed in Nico's mind. It was probably a bad idea, but it seemed silly not to try it. "You know, she was wearing a tessera bracelet…."

Frank seemed to put those words together slowly, letting the meaning sink in.

He grabbed his own bracelet and rubbed his thumb along the glossy ceramic pendant. "Show me Hazel Levesque," he said. "Wherever she is."

But nothing happened. No rainbow-tinted sphere. No Hazel. Just darkness and silence.

CHAPTER 25

When the spear touched Hazel, she thought, *What if I'm wrong?*

The cavern shook with the fury she'd unleashed—a deadly rain of rubies and emeralds. She felt flames traveling up her chest, but there was no pain—just a wave of numbness, as if her entire body were falling asleep.

Darkness enveloped her. The guard's skeletal fingers loosened around her throat. She fell—down, down, down, twisting and turning, but she never hit the floor. She tried to scream, to grab hold of something, but there was nothing. Just cold emptiness.

Then she landed on her side, *hard*.

Her breath was knocked out of her. Fireworks exploded in her eyes. She clawed her fingers into warm earth. Grass. Sunlight blinded her. She smelled mulch and pine. Definitely not the Underworld…

Where had they sent her?

She pushed herself up on one elbow, wincing from the pain in her ribs. Her windpipe felt bruised and swollen. As her eyes adjusted, a massive beastly face loomed over her, blocking her field of vision.

She tried to scoot back on her hands and feet. She kicked wildly, desperate to get away.

"Hazel, it is me," said a deep, gentle voice.

She forced down her panic. She knew those wide-set brown eyes, those fuzzy ears, the glistening snout with the gold septum ring set between the nostrils.

"Asterion," she sobbed.

She threw herself into the bull-man's arms. He didn't say anything—just held her close and rubbed an enormous hand up and down her back.

"You're alive!" She pulled away to look at him. "You're *alive*."

"So far," he agreed, giving her a melancholy smile. "Since you are here, I assume the court sentenced you as well. I am so sorry, my friend."

Hazel shuddered. "I just hope Will and Nico are okay."

She told Asterion what had happened in the courtroom after he was condemned—the judges' screed against people who tried to change their nature, Hazel's growing suspicion that maybe Asterion had been transported somewhere rather than killed, her attempt with Nico and Will to break free from the court, and her final cryptic message to Nico, the only words she'd been able to force out as the guard choked her: *Don't believe it.*

Asterion patted her knee. "You did what you could. And you were right about the nature of our punishment. Come, the others will want to see you."

"The others…?"

Hazel's voice died as she looked around her. She'd been so focused on Asterion she hadn't really taken in her surroundings.

They were in some sort of park, and they weren't alone. Rows of stunted knobby cypress trees stretched in either direction, like the ones in Civic Center Plaza. This space was much bigger, though—a shallow oval basin about a quarter mile wide and twice as long. The shape reminded Hazel of the Circus Maximus back in New Rome, an image reinforced by the half-dozen centaurs presently galloping around the perimeter, apparently looking for a way out.

Park benches lined the walkways, and most of the seats were taken by mythic beings. Two satyrs were having an argument, fighting over a lunch bag. A dog-headed man—a cynocephalus—was passed out asleep, his hands and feet twitching like he was chasing rabbits in his dreams. In the pool of a nearby fountain, a pack of telkhines lounged like wayward sea lions, unconcerned by the bronze Colchis bull drinking nearby, its fiery breath making the water boil.

At the near end of the park rose a sandstone band shell flanked by classical columns. Standing on the steps was a woman holding a toddler…except as Hazel studied them more closely, she realized the toddler had leafy green wings, and the woman's hair was on fire.

"Arielle?" Hazel muttered in disbelief. "Arielle! Quinoa!"

She ran toward them, stumbling as she tried to regain the use of her body. Asterion followed in her wake.

Arielle and Quinoa spotted her and came running.

"Hazel Levesque!" Quinoa launched himself from Arielle's arms straight into Hazel's. "You actually found us!"

Arielle grinned, which was a little unnerving given the fangs, but she looked delighted.

“I never thought I’d be so happy to see a demigod,” said the empousa. “But how are you here? You’re not a mythic— Oof!”

That last sound came when Hazel wrapped her in a hug, squeezing Quinoa between them. Hazel didn’t even care that the empousa’s flaming head was probably singeing her own hair, or that Arielle’s donkey hoof was now on her toes. She was so glad to see the mythics alive.

Finally, Quinoa mumbled, “Can’t…breathe.”

Hazel stepped back, blinking away happy tears. “Thank the gods you’re alive! But what is going on here?”

“We’d like to know that too,” said Arielle. “Short answer: we’re trapped.”

“Trapped?” Hazel scanned the area. “But…”

From where they stood, Hazel could see numerous sets of steps leading out of the basin. There were no walls, no barricades, just flower beds lining the embankments. Cars and tour buses moved freely along the road that circled the park. Beyond that, buildings peeked over the treetops. The nearest was a long angular wedge of dark stone—maybe an art museum?

“How are we trapped?” she asked.

Then she spotted the centaurs again, galloping around the perimeter. Every so often they would stop to throw themselves at the steps or try to leap over the hedges, only to bounce back in frustration. Some were repelled so forcefully they tumbled head over hooves.

Asterion extended a hand. “Come, we’ll show you.”

Hazel followed the empousa and Asterion while Quinoa nestled in the crook of her arm. His claws dug into Hazel’s chest. His leafy wings were scratchy against her skin, but she didn’t mind. She never thought she’d feel motherly toward an herbaceous plant, but she would’ve fought off a drakon to protect the karpos.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to. They passed one small drakon—a baby no more than twenty feet long, curled around a metal lamppost—but it didn’t seem interested in fighting. It was too busy scanning the horizon like a lookout from a crow’s nest.

A giant boar eyed her suspiciously and then went back to rubbing its tusks against a tree trunk. A harpy roosting in the branches above screeched down at it, “Could you not?” A few feet away, something that looked like a massive badger burrowed into the sandy soil like it was trying to dig an escape tunnel.

Arielle led them to a nearby stairway that led up to the road. She stopped just short of the bottom step and then turned to Hazel.

“Open your hand so it is flat,” said the empousa. “Press gently. Otherwise, you may get hurt.”

Hazel didn’t like the sound of that, but she did as Arielle told her to, pushing her palm outward. She felt silly, like a mime in an imaginary box, until she touched something *solid*—a cold, hard, invisible wall.

She pulled her hand away. “What is that?”

“Like I said,” replied Arielle. “We’re trapped.”

Outside the invisible wall, mortal life continued as usual. A taxi drove past. A man jogged by pushing a stroller, a pit bull running alongside on a leash.

“Hey!” Hazel shouted at the jogger. “Can you hear me?”

The man just kept running. Even the dog didn’t look in her direction.

“They cannot see or hear us,” Arielle said. “We’re not sure why. Every so often, a mortal tries to enter the park and then gets confused and simply turns away. This entire area is sealed off, only mythics within…and now you, Praetor. The centaurs keep looking for weak spots, because they are not very bright, but the more force you apply to the barrier, the harder it will repel you.”

“Trust me on that,” Asterion grumbled. “I have only been here a little longer than you, Hazel, but the first thing I did was try to charge through this magic boundary. I nearly broke my horns off.”

She turned and gazed across the park. On the opposite side of the plaza stood another museum-type building—a long facade of white stone and glass, its roof a grassy landscape of artificial hills.

“That’s the California Academy of Sciences,” Hazel realized. “We’re in Golden Gate Park!”

Asterion scratched the side of his snout. “I am not familiar with human geographical locations. Are we still in San Francisco?”

Hazel nodded. Trapped or not, she felt a sense of relief. At least they weren’t someplace beyond the reach of all help—like in Tartarus or Alaska. “This is maybe five miles from the courthouse downtown. Which raises the question of how those guards transported us here.”

“Yeah,” Quinoa said, his face scrunched up in his characteristic scowl. “We wondered if it was that shadow-travel thing you and Nico are always talking about, but—”

“Shadow-travel!” Hazel hastily set down the karpos. “Let me try something.”

She stepped toward a nearby cypress, whose trunk cast a nice dark shadow across the crushed stone. She imagined her bed in Camp Jupiter, with the extra-cushy pillow she loved so much. She put one foot in the shadow, willing herself to travel through it…but nothing happened.

"It's not working," she said mournfully. "I should be able to shadow-travel *anywhere*."

Asterion crossed his arms. "None of this makes sense. The abductions. The trials. Sentencing us to death, but instead, sending us to some sort of…holding area. What does this Court of the Dead want, and how did they get the power to create something like this prison?"

"Too many questions," Arielle muttered. "We've been here for *days* now, and new mythics just keep arriving, but…" She froze. "Wait. What about the others? Are Orcus and Johan and Semele all right?"

She sounded so worried Hazel was tempted to give her another hug.

"They were fine when I left camp." She gave the mythics a quick recap of what had been happening since they'd been abducted, including their standoff with Laverna in the principia.

Quinoa grunted. "That explains why the last thing I remember is a sack going over my head. Oh man…I just hope the kindergartners aren't too disappointed. I promised I'd come back and teach them how to raise earthworms! And you *never* break a promise to a kid."

Hazel couldn't bear seeing him so dispirited, his tiny shoulders and diaper sagging. "We're going to get out of here," she told him. "And I never break a promise to a friend."

Quinoa hugged her leg and began to sniffle. "I'm not crying," he insisted. "It's just all the dust."

Arielle sat on the nearest bench and began to massage her donkey knee. Hazel suspected it must be hard on the joints to have mismatched legs.

"At least you got more information at your trials," the empousa said. "I didn't think to demand the judges introduce themselves."

"Those masks were terrifying," Quinoa agreed, wiping away a green streak (that totally wasn't a tear) from his face. "Not that I was personally scared, mind you, but I can see how others could have been."

Hazel smiled. "Well, Asterion had more presence of mind than I did."

"And this Pirithous person…" said Arielle. "You recognized him from the Underworld?"

"Yeah," Hazel said. "He, um, used to hang out in the Fields of Asphodel."

She explained that by *hang out*, she actually meant Pirithous had been stuck in an outcropping of granite like he'd fallen asleep and melted into the rock. But how he'd managed to escape, Hazel had no idea.

Arielle grimaced. "So Pirithous was not one of the judges of the dead?"

"Far from it," Hazel said.

Thinking about Asphodel, she looked around at the stunted trees in the barren fields of crushed rock—so much like the Civic Center Plaza next to the courthouse. It couldn't be a coincidence that Pirithous had chosen two locations reminiscent of Asphodel in which to judge and detain his convicted mythics. It gave Hazel the same uneasy feeling as Pirithous's grotesque Hades/Pluto mask, like the court was meant to be an elaborate mockery—a criticism of her father and his entire system of judgment.

"Pirithous must have done something truly heinous," Asterion said, "to warrant such punishment."

"And now he thinks he's worthy of judging others," Quinoa said. "Typical human—no offense."

Hazel shrugged. There were plenty of humans she admired, and others she was embarrassed to share a species with. They were not so different from mythics in that respect.

"Speaking of humans…" Asterion pointed to the top of the steps.

An older mortal couple had stopped to look into the park. The woman wore tie-dye-patterned Lycra exercise clothes and a bright pink visor that cinched her gray hair into an hourglass shape. The man wore a similar outfit and was walking with ski poles.

"When do you think they'll be done with the construction?" the woman asked, squinting at something Hazel couldn't see. Apparently, the Mist had created a DO NOT ENTER: UNDER CONSTRUCTION sign.

The man harrumphed. "This may come as a shock to you, Stephanie, but I'm not the Recreation and Parks Department."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't say you were, Mark."

"Then how am I supposed to know when the place will reopen? Waste of our tax dollars, if you ask me!"

The two walked off, still bickering.

"We could hear them," Hazel noted. "But they can't hear us?"

"I don't know why," said Arielle.

“I just want to *leave*,” Quinoa said. “I miss my hydroponic lights! I miss Camp Jupiter!”

“We all do, young one,” said Asterion. “Perhaps if we could figure out why the judges dumped us here…”

Arielle extended her arms. “Welcome to our confusion. It’s lovely here. There’s pie!”

“There is?” asked Quinoa. “Where? I’m hungry!”

“It was sarcasm,” Arielle muttered.

“I don’t care what flavor it is!”

Hazel’s own stomach growled. “What *have* you all been eating?”

Arielle snorted. “Whatever we can find. The vegetarians among us have been eating trees, shrubs, flowers…For the rest of us, it’s been a challenge.”

Hazel wondered how long an empousa could go without blood. She decided not to ask. And that drakon they’d seen on the lamppost…that had to require a fairly substantial meat diet.

“There were a couple of food stashes inside the barrier,” Quinoa added. “An old hot dog stand. A closed-down café. But they’ve been pretty well picked over. We heard the first mythics started arriving here last month.”

“That’s a long time to be imprisoned,” Hazel said. “I guess that’s when the court started operating.”

“Mmm,” Asterion said. “And I notice most of the mythics have split into groups to stay with their own kind. I imagine that is because, eventually, the stronger prisoners will have to start eating the weaker ones.”

Hazel shuddered. Now that she thought about it, she was kind of surprised that violence hadn’t already broken out.

A couple of Laistrygonian giants—each eight feet tall and covered in tattoos—were camped outside a makeshift tarp tent. In the park’s central fountain, the largest of three, an enormous blue-green crab had made itself at home. And at the far end of the park, Hazel spotted what looked like a herd of katoblepones, the monstrous cattle that Frank once destroyed in Venice.

At the thought of Frank, Hazel’s heart ached. He must be out of his mind with worry.

“Has anyone done a head count?” Hazel asked. “How many creatures are here?”

“One hundred and eight,” said Quinoa, “including you now, Hazel.” He shrugged self-consciously. “I enjoy counting. It’s one reason I want to teach children.”

“Hey, no judgment,” Hazel said. “I think that’s great!”

“I can do another count if you want!” The karpos flapped his wings, achieved wobbly liftoff, and then fluttered off toward the nearest fountain. “One, two, three…Stand still, you centaurs!”

“Just be careful!” Arielle called after him. Then she faced Hazel. “It gives him something to do, to take his mind off”—she gestured around them—“you know, being trapped in an invisible cage.”

Arielle’s words triggered something in Hazel’s mind. “A cage…You said you’ve walked the entire perimeter?”

“Many times,” said Arielle. “There’s no way out.”

“But did you look for anything unusual? Anything that might be causing the barrier?”

The empousa’s hair burned more brightly, as if she were expending more energy to process Hazel’s question. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Rather than try to explain, Hazel marched up to the barrier. She pressed her palm against the invisible wall. Then she began walking west, keeping her hand in contact with the cool surface. Asterion and Arielle followed.

“What is she *doing*?” Arielle asked.

Asterion grunted. “I often do not understand demigods.”

The boundary ran straight, but it was not always easy to follow. At one point, Hazel had to climb through some hedges and then clamber over the pedestal of a large statue—a helmeted man holding a sword to the sky. Finally, as she approached the far end of the plaza, she found a corner—a forty-five-degree turn in the wall.

She crouched, tracing her fingers to ground level, and saw what she was looking for. Where the two sections of the invisible wall met, a small metal object had been tucked under a sage bush. Its twelve sides were hollow Celestial bronze, with a hole in each face and a protruding knob wherever three corners met. Unfortunately, it was on the other side of the boundary, out of reach.

“That’s it,” she said. “This is how they’re holding us!”

Asterion knelt next to her. “What is it?”

“A dodecahedron,” she said. “Did Johan tell you how he was tricked into releasing one from the treasury?”

“He did. He said the object froze a demigod in place.”

“One dodecahedron can do that,” she said. “I bet we’ll find three more of these, one at each corner of this park.”

“But how do they work?” asked Arielle.

“I…don’t know, exactly,” Hazel admitted. “They’re ancient creations. But once they’re set up and activated, they capture and hold anything within their perimeter. Indefinitely.”

The empousa scowled. “Powerful magic for something so small. Couldn’t we simply break the connection somehow? Perhaps one of the harpies could fly out there and retrieve it.”

Hazel considered this. She had an uneasy feeling that Pirithous wouldn’t make it so easy to escape his prison. And if a flying prisoner could not get out…that raised a disturbing possibility about the nature of this cage.

“Ah,” said a familiar voice, somewhere to her left. “There you are, Hazel Levesque!”

Hazel rose and then stumbled backward into Asterion.

Standing just outside the invisible barrier was Pirithous himself.

He was still wearing his judge robes, his Hades mask hanging from a rope around his neck. His cruel smile sent a chill down Hazel’s spine.

“How are you settling in?” he asked. “Are the facilities to your liking?”

“Let us out, Pirithous,” she growled.

“Oh, but we’re just getting started!” he said, his eyes alight with joy.

Asterion touched her arm. “Come away, Hazel. We do not need to talk to this monster.”

“Funny that you should use that word, Asterion,” said the judge. “Rather ironic.”

“Shut up,” snapped Hazel.

He chuckled. “Manners, young lady. I know you think I’m a villain. And I did make a mistake, long ago. But I paid for my crime a hundred times over. At least *your* punishment will be fair and just.”

“Fair and…” Hazel was so angry she choked on the words. She wanted to punch Pirithous in the face, but she guessed the barrier would break her hand.

“What exactly was your crime?” asked Arielle. “It must have been pretty bad if you ended up grafted to a rock.”

Pirithous's expression soured. His small, dark eyes bored into Hazel's. "I see you've shared the story of how we met."

"But all those years in Asphodel," Hazel recalled, "you never once explained how you got in trouble. You were too busy whining about your rigged trial and unfair punishment."

"Because it *was* unfair!" he shouted. Then he paused, evidently trying to regain control of his anger. "But that's fine. I let it guide me to moral clarity." He pointed a finger at Hazel. "That's how I crossed paths with *you*. In a way, you inspired my court as much as your brother did."

Hazel held back angry tears. She didn't want to give Pirithous the satisfaction.

"Don't blame your megalomania on me," she said. "You don't deserve power over anyone."

Pirithous feigned shock. "Oh, do I not? Yet I was king of the Lapiths. I was worshipped as a hero across Greece. I led armies into battle. And then, when Theseus and I ventured into the Underworld, we both were fused to that cursed rock. *Theseus* was freed by Hercules. But me? No. *Your father* deemed me unworthy of rescue. He would not allow it. He…"

Pirithous seemed to realize that he had been subconsciously gripping the gold mask hanging around his neck, trying to crush the face of Hades. He dropped his hands.

"At any rate," he continued, "I was left behind. I was stuck in that rock for *thousands* of years. Then you came along, Hazel Levesque. You were in Asphodel for, what, a few decades? One of a billion souls who actually belonged in that place. But then your entitled brother freed you! Did Hades object to that? No! Did you deserve it? No!"

His pale face had turned bright red. A vein in his right temple looked like it was about to burst. "Do you know what it feels like to be disrespected like that?"

There were a lot of things Hazel could've said in response, but Pirithous's words were so absurd Hazel just broke into laughter.

He peered at her with disgust. "Of course you do not understand."

Hazel steadied her breathing. It felt good to laugh in Pirithous's face, but there were other lives on the line besides hers.

"If your grudge is with Nico and me," Hazel said, "let the mythics go free. They haven't done anything to you."

Pirithous scoffed. "Nice try, but that's not in the plan. Remember, you all have been sentenced to death."

“Allow me to hazard a guess,” said Asterion. “You put us in here with little food and water. Then you wait until we turn on each other. In this way, you prove to yourself that we were monsters all along, unworthy of any other life.”

Pirithous looked stunned. “Oh, that’s good. That’s very good! I confess I hadn’t thought of that. But no, Asterion, I don’t really care how or when you die in this cage. Your fate will serve a much greater purpose than simply proving the obvious. You will help me put the world to rights!”

Arielle slammed her fist against the barrier, and then she reeled backward, cradling her injured hand. “We won’t help you with *anything*. Let us out!”

“You’re an impatient one, Arielle.” Pirithous shook his head like a disappointed father. “Give it time. More and more of you will appear in this prison, and with each new addition, I’ll be closer to my goal.”

Hazel felt like she was banging her head on the invisible wall. “Which is *what*?”

“For starters, I’m going to break the Mist.”

Hazel blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The Mist has always hidden our world from that of the humans,” said the judge. “We’ve fought entire wars without mortals knowing what was really happening.”

“And?” asked Asterion.

The man’s smile was absolute evil. “Never has there been such a high concentration of mythical beings in one small space at the same time. Eventually, it will be too much for the Mist to cover. When it breaks from the sheer pressure I’ve exerted on it, the mortal world will see exactly what you are, and how sloppy the Underworld has been about enforcing its borders. There will be chaos. Hades’s misrule will be laid bare for all to see. He will *have* to respond.”

Asterion snorted. “All of this, to embarrass Hades?”

“That is the beginning,” Pirithous said. “When he arrives…well, I have a veritable army of gods, monsters, and demons on my side. All the forgotten and misunderstood stand with me. They all appreciate my logic. No one is above justice, even the gods.”

Hazel shivered. “So that’s what this is about. You want to put my *father* on trial?”

“And why not?” he cried. “Have you *seen* the state of the Underworld since the Doors of Death opened? It’s *chaos*. You have Titans becoming heroes, heroes venturing into Tartarus, the Minotaur playing dress-up in the mortal world with his hand-knitted outfits. There is no order. No just punishment. Hades must answer for this. He will have his day in court.”

“You’re delusional,” said Hazel. “If my father does show up, he will tear you into a million pieces.”

The gleam in Pirithous’s eyes was calm and self-assured. It made Hazel nervous.

“We will see,” he said. “But for now, I must return to court. So many cases on the afternoon’s docket!” He turned to go and then hesitated. “By the way, I heard the tail end of your conversation. There *is* a top to this prison. Can’t have anyone flying out, can we? And I suppose you could try convincing a mortal to move one of the dodecahedrons….” He smiled at Arielle. “If, for instance, you had someone who could charmspeak. But I don’t think that would end well for the mortal. These devices carry quite a charge when they are generating a perimeter of this size….”

Then Pirithous disappeared in a burst of flame and ash…which was not nearly as satisfying to watch as Hazel would’ve hoped.

Arielle swore under her breath. “I hate that man. We have to get out of here.”

“I know,” said Hazel. “Even if we don’t run out of food or water, we have another problem. Because if Pirithous is telling the truth about this prison, we’re in a sealed box with limited vegetation and more mythics arriving all the time.”

“Meaning?” asked Arielle.

“Eventually,” Hazel said, “we’re going to run out of oxygen.”

Will put his hands on his hips and sighed. “I’m never going to complain about another training session at Camp Half-Blood again.”

Nico wanted to say *You’re cute when you’re annoyed*, but he recognized that their situation was deeply, deeply frustrating. Turned out you could *say* you wanted to train the demigods to work with the Cocoa Puffs, but that didn’t mean the Cocoa Puffs would actually cooperate.

Nico, Frank, and Will stood on the Field of Mars alongside the griffin Orcus. They were watching legionnaires attempt to chase down and catch the Puffs in butterfly nets. Nico had tried to get the cacodemons to stay in one spot, but they seemed to think that being pursued was a game.

“They were better behaved in the principia,” Frank said. “What happened?”

Nico shrugged. “They have minds of their own. The longer they stay with me, the more independent they seem to act. They don’t do anything they don’t want to.”

“Clearly they take after you,” Will deadpanned.

Orcus grunted. “Well, I respect any creature who makes demigods work harder.”

“Are you on our side or not?” asked Frank.

“I’m on the side of getting my friends back,” said the griffin. “But I also enjoy a good game of keep-away.”

A few yards away, Lavinia Asimov face-planted as she tried to capture Defiance in her net. “I’m fine!” she called. “I meant to do that!”

Orcus squawked. “Enough of this. I’m going to help.” The griffin flew off and began dive-bombing cacodemons.

Nico turned to Frank. “Did you get the harnesses?”

The praetor knelt and opened a large duffel bag at his feet. Then he pulled out a few tangles of leather. “Tyson made them. Different sizes, too.”

Frank handed one to Nico. It was almost like a baby carrier—a set of straps and buckles on the back, and an adjustable pouch on the front to secure a Puff against the wearer’s chest.

“And he made a custom one for you, Will,” he said.

Will took the offered harness, and Nico quickly saw how it was a custom job: it had a leather quiver on the back, as well as a couple of leather straps to hold a bow.

“No way,” said Will. He practically glowed with excitement as he put it on. “Man, that’s so cool.”

“Smart design,” Nico said. “Not that I expected any less of Tyson.”

Guilt weighed on him—the internal kind, not the Puff—when he thought about the Cyclops. He hadn’t even visited New Rome since his arrival, much less taken time to see his friends there. It had been that kind of week.

“Well, it would be nice if we could actually *use* the harnesses,” said Frank, fixing Nico with a determined glare.

“All right, all right. I’ll do something.” He held out his hand to Will. “Snack me.”

Will grinned, then dug into his cargo pockets and produced a small bounty of extra-dark chocolate bars—the preferred choice of cacodemons everywhere.

Nico walked out onto the field just as Deion ran by yelling some sort of war cry, pursuing Loneliness with his net raised high. Nico held back a laugh. He put two fingers in his mouth and let loose a loud, sharp whistle. “Cocoa Puffs!” he cried. “Treat-treats!” He had no idea if this would work.

The cacodemons immediately turned to look his way. Then they came rolling and stumbling over, as any sensible creature would when offered treat-treats.

“I can’t believe it was that easy,” said Will.

The legionnaires glared at Nico, maybe wondering why he hadn’t done that sooner, or at least offered *them* treat-treats.

“All right, everyone!” Frank called out. “Lose the butterfly nets and gather round.”

He said this in English, probably because *Lose the butterfly nets* was not a typical command you’d bark in Latin at your Roman legion.

A handful of demigods had gathered for the rescue mission: Savannah, Deion, and Yazan from the Second Cohort, since they’d worked with Puffs before; Lavinia from the Fifth; and Lucius Silver, the prankster from the First Cohort who was now Johan’s self-appointed bodyguard. Johan and Semele would be joining the mission too, but they were presently in the principia, searching for more information about Pirithous.

Many more demigods had volunteered. After all, their beloved praetor Hazel was missing. But Frank had insisted that a small group was better. Plus, a larger party wouldn’t fit in the legion’s

Chevy Express van, and he didn't like the idea of taking the entire herd of Puffs on the BART. Frank was nothing if not practical.

As the Puffs ate their chocolate, Nico watched Frank explain how the harnesses worked. The group seemed a bit nervous, shifting from one foot to the other, but that was no surprise. Nico remembered how strange and frightening it had been when he was preparing to head to Manhattan to fight Kronos and his army.

He was especially glad Savannah had turned up. After Laverna had short-circuited her tesserae, Nico had been afraid that Savannah would take the failure hard and retreat back into herself. Instead, she looked more determined than ever.

She still stood apart, though. Nico imagined her tragic history wrapped around her like a dampening field—a swirl of anger, grief, and frustration that dulled the entire world. He could relate. You could still feel alone in a crowd because your life was so unlike that of those around you.

He hoped she'd be up for the possible fight to come. Then he chided himself. *Don't underestimate her. She's making the choice to be here.*

"Nico?"

He glanced over at Frank. "Huh?"

"We're ready for you," he said.

The legionnaires were now all wearing their harnesses, looking like a squad of babysitter commandos. Even Orcus had a tiny harness across his back.

"Right." Nico sucked in a deep breath. "I think you all know me—"

"You're my boyfriend," said Will, winking at him.

Nico blushed. Why was he blushing? Why did Will always make him blush?

"Anyway…" Nico said. "A little review on cacodemons and why we need to use them."

He launched into a brief summary of how Nyx had created the demon personifications of his core emotions and experiences. He explained how contact with a Cocoa Puff allowed it to bring forth a similar emotion in someone else.

"It's disorienting at first," he warned. "Many of you already know that. But Hazel discovered something before she—" He faltered and then moved on as quickly as possible. "Um, she found out that a Cocoa Puff can heighten your awareness, give you a better chance of seeing through the Mist, even when someone is actively trying to manipulate it against you. It's not perfect—"

“Can confirm,” Yazan muttered, getting some nervous laughter from the others.

“But we’ll need every advantage,” Nico continued. “And after our experience with that terrible court, I’m pretty sure that the more you use the Puffs, the more help they can offer.”

Lavinia raised her hand. “Have you figured out how they do it?”

“Maybe they’re not of this world,” said Deion. He made some beeping UFO sounds. Lavinia kicked his shin.

“They’re not *aliens*,” said Nico. “Best explanation I can give you? They show you the truth.”

“The truth?” Lucius inched closer to the pack of Puffs. “What does *that* mean?”

“This,” said Savannah. She reached down and scooped up Grief. It snuggled against her, and tears began streaming down her face.

Lavinia frowned. “Are you okay?”

“I am,” Savannah said, her lower lip quivering. “I’m also sad. I miss my parents so much. Ever since I’ve come to camp, I’ve been doing everything I could to ignore that feeling. But when I’m holding this Puff…I can’t run from the truth. I see my feelings so *clearly*. And that makes everything easier to accept. It’s sort of like, I don’t know, like when I’m denying my feelings, I’m using the Mist against *myself*, and the Puff doesn’t let me do that.” She knit her eyebrows. “That probably doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s fascinating,” said Will. “And it actually makes perfect sense.”

For the millionth time, Nico was grateful to have such an empathetic boyfriend.

He put his hand on Will’s shoulder. “Could you take over? Pair everybody up with a Puff?”

Will met his eyes and seemed to get the message: Nico wanted to talk to Savannah alone, make sure she was truly okay.

“Of course!” Will said cheerfully. “All right, campers! Let’s match you all with an emotion!”

The Puffs bounced excitedly around Will’s feet. Of course, Will had chocolate in his pockets, so why wouldn’t they?

Nico turned to Savannah, whose face was still flushed. “Walk with me?”

She nodded, wiping away tears with the sleeve of her pullover. They crossed to the southern part of the Field of Mars, where Hannibal the elephant was enjoying some destruction therapy, wielding a tree trunk like a baseball bat as he smacked down old fortifications. Nico wished they

could take the elephant with them to face Pirithous, but he doubted Hannibal would fit in a Chevrolet Express.

Once they were out of earshot from the group, Nico asked, “Savannah, can I do anything to help?”

She tucked Grief into the pouch of her carrier, where it nestled and purred. “You’ve already helped me a lot, but…yeah, I’ll take anything I can get.” She smiled sadly. “Does it ever get easier?”

Nico was silent for a moment, unsure how to express what was on his mind. He decided the direct route would be best.

“Easier, yes,” he said. “But never easy. Just last night I dreamed about my mother and my sister Bianca…right before the fire, when Zeus killed my mom.”

She looked stunned. “You’re still dreaming about it?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “I think I had this idea when I was younger that if I just got all my sadness out of the way, then I’d never feel it again. But that’s not how it works.”

Savannah rubbed her sniffly nose. “I—I didn’t know that. So it just goes on *forever*?”

Nico shrugged. “I mean…yes? But it doesn’t feel the same as it did in the beginning. It dulls over time. And I promise this isn’t as sad as it sounds, but I sometimes go days or weeks without thinking about it. Same with Bianca. Or Jason. I still miss them, but it’s like…”

Nico hesitated, and the image of the exploding TV set from his last conversation with Mr. D arrived in his mind.

“It’s like having a television on in another room. You can sense it’s there, but it’s easy to drown out and forget.”

She hugged herself in the morning cold. “I’d settle for feeling normal for a day.”

“I know,” he said. “And it’s probably hard to believe right now, but you will feel joy again. It just may be harder to find. It won’t come running when you offer it chocolate like *this* little greedy-guts.”

Grief peered up from the comfort of its pouch, purring sleepily as if to say *More chocolate? Yes, please.*

Savannah let out a broken laugh. “I’m actually getting comfortable with this little guy. He makes me feel so much. But it’s not just my parents’ death I see when I hold him. It’s little things from our lives together. My dad pushing me on the swing at the playground. My mom showing me

how to center a pot on the wheel. Waking up on Christmas morning to a mound of presents…that kind of stuff."

"I get that," Nico said. "Lately I've been noticing the same thing—the Puffs showing me *positive* memories associated with their emotions. I guess that makes sense. Grief is remembering the awful and the magical, sometimes all at once."

Savannah gazed back at the demigod squad now strapping Cocoa Puffs into their carriers like they were preparing for the weirdest nursery-school field trip ever.

"I still want to go with you," she said. "To find Hazel."

He smiled. "I hoped you would."

"Even though I'm a scared, emotional mess?"

"That's okay! You don't think I'm anxious about this?"

"It's hard to tell," she admitted. "I guess when I see people like you and Will and Frank, I assume you're fearless and perfectly put-together."

He barked out a laugh. "Oh, I assure you that we're just as messed-up as everyone else."

Savannah's eyes were still as red as her hair, but they looked a little warmer. Comforted.

"Thank you," she said. "It's not easy to ask for help. Can we head back now? I do want to train some more."

Something tugged at Nico's heart—like a small magnet pulling his attention south. *It's not easy to ask for help*.

It had never been easy for Nico, either, but maybe it was time to treat himself with the same honesty he gave to others. He looked across the valley, toward the glittering domes and spires of Temple Hill.

"Actually, would you mind heading back alone?" he asked Savannah. "Tell Will I needed to speak with someone."

Hazel could tell the Court of the Dead was working overtime to fulfill their plan of breaking the Mist. By sunrise the next morning, the official count inside Pirithous's trap was 249 living beings.

She wasn't sure how the Mist was supposed to "break," exactly. She'd never heard of such a thing happening before. But now that she'd become more attuned to the Mist's currents, she could sense them moving swifter and stronger around their prison, accumulating like scar tissue trying to cover a wound. That probably wasn't a good sign.

For the moment, Hazel had other problems to focus on. She was hungry. She was freezing. And then there was the little issue of running out of air to breathe. Hazel was no scientist. She had no idea how to run the variables to figure out when their oxygen might be depleted, but she knew they were no closer to finding an escape than they were yesterday.

Last night Hazel had eventually fallen asleep under a huge sycamore tree. She'd dreamed about the judgment she'd received in the Underworld so very long ago. She did not like being judged. Being misunderstood. Being shamed. But she also held on to a gnawing doubt that maybe Pirithous had a point—maybe she *had* belonged in Asphodel. As much as she'd tried to be worthy of a second chance since returning to the upper world, she'd never quite lost the sense that she'd cheated the system when Nico rescued her.

Regardless, that did not justify what the Court of the Dead was doing to all these mythics who just wanted to live a different kind of life. And it did not lessen her desire to smack Pirithous in the face with her spatha.

She spent the morning helping Asterion, Arielle, and Quinoa, who were doing their best to keep all the newcomers informed in order to prevent mass hysteria.

She met self-identified monsters, like a Cyclops named Julian, who had been kidnapped in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for daring to operate a fusion taco food truck. She learned that Stymphalian birds not only grouped themselves into flocks but also shared the same name within the flock and communicated as a single organism. The birds here were named Gregory. They'd been exiled from the rest of their species because, unlike most Stymphalian birds, Gregory enjoyed loud noises. They were particularly fond of Norwegian death metal.

She met many other mythics who had just been trying to make a living in the human world. She got a chance to speak briefly to Morpho, the telkhine Etsy entrepreneur who had been

“executed” as Hazel and her friends arrived at the courthouse. Asterion even introduced her to a centaur named Nessus who was apparently famous for killing Hercules through trickery.

Nessus did not seem crafty or murderous to Hazel, at least not anymore. He blushed when Asterion told the Hercules story.

“I’m sorry I ever did that,” Nessus said. “I just like making custom birdhouses. I have a workshop in Vermont. You should visit sometime!”

Asterion smiled like a proud father. “I will trade you some of my soon-to-be-patented hand-knitted underwear!”

“If we ever get out of here,” Quinoa said under his breath.

“When,” Hazel corrected him.

Hazel tried to cling to that optimism, but as more and more mythics materialized in the park, her distress grew. The edible foliage was disappearing. Water was still running through the fountains, but the basins were getting mucky and polluted. The giant crab wasn’t helping. Asterion had been forced to break up a fight over a bag of peanuts between some fauns and a strix—a flesh-eating owl-like creature who spat milk. Hazel wondered *why* the strix spat milk, and where that milk had come from, but she decided that some things were better left unknown.

“This just feels so *cruel*,” Arielle said as she helped a freshly arrived dracaena to her feet. “How can Pirithous think it’s just and fair?”

Asterion grunted. “He has aptly named his court, Arielle. It is a court of the dead. Their hearts no longer beat like ours. These judges have no real recollection of what it was like to be alive in this world—how *hard* it is.”

Hazel knew Asterion had a point, but she wanted to argue that being dead was no excuse for being callous. She’d been dead. She’d gotten over it. And she’d never stopped feeling.

“They want us to remain the same forever,” she said. “They don’t understand that every living thing has the capacity to change.”

Arielle nodded. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? If we try to do something different from what we were destined to do at birth, they punish us for it.”

“You are indeed correct.” Asterion sighed. “I am going to do another walk around the park. For some reason, my presence seems to dissuade fights from breaking out.”

“I’ll come with.” Quinoa flapped his wings. “Probably time to do another head count!”

While Arielle counseled the new dracaena, Hazel headed east to check on the harpies, two of whom had injured themselves last night testing Pirithous's claim that their prison had a ceiling. Turns out it did, in fact, have a ceiling.

The harpies' chosen leader, Rhodope, sat atop a cypress tree, scowling down as Hazel approached.

"What do you want, demigod?" Rhodope asked, ruffling her gorgeous orange feathers.

Hazel put her hands up in a placating gesture. "Just checking in. How are your injured?"

"Still injured," Rhodope snapped. "Have you found a way out?"

"Not yet, but we're—"

"Come back when you do," Rhodope said. "Or when you've found a first aid kit. Or a bag of birdseed." She tucked her head under her wing.

Hazel didn't want to push things, so she left without another word. She didn't blame the harpies for their mistrust. She walked along the northern border of the plaza, her anger at Pirithous getting more intense every time she passed a sobbing mythic. Perhaps Asterion was right and the judges had forgotten how difficult it was to live a life. Or maybe they simply didn't care.

She was headed toward a nest of griffins when she spotted a mortal woman just outside the invisible barrier, peering into the plaza with an unusual degree of interest. She was resting her hand right on the invisible wall.

The woman had a striking quality that drew Hazel's eye. Her expression was open and friendly. Her curly blond hair glimmered in the sunshine. From the clothing she was wearing—a maroon leather jacket over an Austin City Limits T-shirt, tight black jeans, and cowboy boots—Hazel guessed she was a musician of some kind.

The stranger shielded her eyes from the sun and scanned the park.

As Hazel moved closer, she heard the woman talking to herself. "What in the world? Are the demigods keeping a zoo now?"

Hazel flinched. *Demigods?*

Whoever this woman was, she knew things mortals weren't supposed to know. And she could apparently see through the Mist. Maybe Hazel should've been suspicious and hidden herself, but some instinct told her this woman wasn't dangerous.

"Hello?" Hazel called.

The woman glanced over. "Oh, my goodness! Hello, sweetheart! Are you a demigod?"

Hazel was so shocked she didn't quite know how to reply. Her usual response would've been *Maybe, unless you kill demigods*, but again, this woman did not seem like a threat.

"I, um, yes?" Hazel said. "Humor me for a second…. What else do you see in this park?"

The woman squinted. "Well, let's see. Centaurs. A baby drakon. Beautiful orange harpies in that tree over there. And…is that a satyr or a faun? I always get those mixed up, but my son says the difference matters."

Hazel's mind was swirling. Her son?

"My name is Hazel," she volunteered.

"Pleased to meet you!" The woman sounded genuine. "I'm Naomi. Just in town for a few days, actually. I've got a show at the Fillmore tomorrow night. Thought I'd check out the park today. Is this your—sorry, I don't know what to call it—monster habitat?"

"Um, not exactly." Hazel still couldn't believe she was having this conversation. "Just to clarify: you're mortal, and you can see through the Mist?"

Naomi gave her a little bow, making her silver dangle earrings jingle. "Afraid so, on both counts."

"And your son…?"

"You probably wouldn't know him," Naomi said. "He's a great kid, also a demigod! But he's way across the country in New York. His name is Will, and— You okay, hon?"

"Will…" Hazel said, feeling wobbly. "Will *Solace*?"

"That's him!" Naomi beamed. Her warm, ear-to-ear smile looked just like Will's. "So you *do* know him?"

"Know him? Ms. Solace, he's one of my favorite people in the world!"

"That's amazing!" Will's mom spread her arms for a hug, and then apparently remembered there was a force field between them. Her arms flopped to her sides. "And no need for the 'Ms. Solace' nonsense, Hazel. You can just call me Naomi. Have you seen Will lately?"

Hazel felt like she was about to pass out. What were the odds of running into Will's mother in San Francisco, just when Hazel most needed to get a message to Will and Nico? Then Hazel asked herself what the odds were of being a daughter of Pluto, or of coming back to life from Asphodel, or of being stuck in a giant invisible cage with 249 mythic creatures. Odds didn't seem to apply when you were a demigod. The chance of weird coincidences was always one hundred percent.

Hazel couldn't control what happened. She burst into tears.

“Oh, honey, what’s wrong?” Naomi stepped forward again but smacked right into the barrier. “Oof! What is this force-field thing?”

“I’m sorry,” Hazel said, sniffling. “It’s just…We’re stuck inside this barrier. Me and all these creatures. There’s this evil Court of the Dead. And we’re running out of air, food, and water. And Will…He *was* with me, at the courthouse in San Francisco, but now I don’t know where he is. I—I could really use your help.”

Naomi’s expression sobered. Hazel knew a mama-bear face when she saw one. Naomi was going into full *nobody touches my kid* mode.

“Of course,” she said. “What can I do?”

“I need you to go to Camp Jupiter,” Hazel said. “I’m pretty sure that’s where Will and Nico are right now, assuming they escaped.”

“Nico!” Naomi’s face lit up. “Oh, I’m so glad he’s here, too. But…escaped? Escaped what?”

Hazel did her best to explain, but it was a lot. She felt like she was tossing Naomi Solace a million balls to juggle all at once: kidnapped mythics, the Court of the Dead, the plan to break the Mist and put Hades on trial. Once she saw Naomi’s eyes glaze over, she realized the details didn’t matter. What *did* matter was that Hazel needed to get her whereabouts to her friends as soon as possible. She instructed Will’s mom about how to find the entrance to Camp Jupiter and what she should say to Frank and the others.

When she was done, Naomi grimaced. “Yeah, I didn’t understand most of that. Court of the Dead. Dodecahedrons. Frank Zhang. But I can definitely relay the message.”

“I can’t thank you enough.”

“You don’t need to, sweetheart. It’s going to be okay.” Her face wrinkled in worry as she typed Hazel’s dictation on her smartphone. “I admit I haven’t had much experience with your world. I was there the day a flock of birds attacked my son in New York and the satyr Maron rescued us, but since then…” Her voice trailed off.

Hazel realized that Naomi was looking past her now, at something that had made her jaw drop.

Hazel turned to find Asterion towering over her.

“You are speaking to a human,” the bull-man noted. “Is she an ally or an enemy?”

“Oh my gods,” said Naomi, her eyes wide. “Are you…?”

“Naomi Solace, meet Asterion,” said Hazel, before Naomi could use the dreaded word *Minotaur*. “Asterion, this is Will’s mother.”

At the mention of Will's name, Asterion immediately took a knee. "Your son is a brave hero, madam. I am indebted to him and his boyfriend for all their assistance."

"Asterion, it's so good to meet you," Naomi said. She seemed to have recovered her wits in record time, given that she was talking to a mountain of mythological muscle. "And please, get up. I wish I could shake your hand or give you a hug!"

"She's going to Camp Jupiter for us," Hazel explained.

Asterion rose. "Then *you* have my admiration as well. Thank you. You will help us immensely by informing our friends of our location."

"I'll get going, then." Naomi hesitated for a moment. "Wow, I'm glad I stopped by the park today. It's like fate!"

Hazel had dealt with the Fates before, and she didn't think much of them, but she gave Naomi a grateful smile. "We're glad, too. Please, be careful."

Naomi Solace dashed off, still talking to herself excitedly.

"She will find them," said Asterion. "This is a wonderful development."

"I know," Hazel said. "But I'm still so worried."

"That is natural when one is trapped," he said. "Imagine how I felt in the Labyrinth. I knew I could easily best every human that was sent to me, yet I still could never leave."

Hazel took his hand. The baby-blue nail polish was starting to chip off his fingernails. Hazel made a mental note to share some new colors with him if—*when*—they got back to camp. "I'm sorry you're a prisoner yet again."

He twitched his ears. "At least now I am with friends. And this time, I was taken prisoner for living the life I wanted to live. That is a risk always worth taking. Besides, hope is not lost! I was just coming to tell you that the telkhines have an idea."

"An idea? For what?"

He smiled. "They think we can *dig* our way out."

CHAPTER 28

Nico stood at the crossroads. To the east, the road led to New Rome. To the south, it meandered toward Temple Hill.

His original impulse had been to visit his father's shrine. Hades had never been one to respond to his prayers, but Nico harbored a slim hope that, after their most recent interaction, the god might be open to appearing and giving him some advice.

Now he wasn't sure that was a good idea. Did he really want to burden his father with yet another demigod conflict? Surely Hades already knew what was going on with Pirithous and this Court of the Dead. And if he didn't, did Nico really want to be the one to break the bad news?

Savannah's words echoed in his head: *It's not easy to ask for help.*

His other option was in New Rome. He felt a pang of sadness as he looked at the city's gleaming white streets and red-tiled roofs. He missed Percy and Annabeth, who were so very close to him right now. They'd know what to do. They'd be willing to help in a heartbeat.

But Percy and Annabeth had made it to college. They deserved a life beyond battles and quests.

Nico turned back toward Temple Hill. He chided himself for his indecision. Had he *ever* been a burden to his father? If Nico wanted Hades to act more like a regular dad, Nico needed to treat him more like a regular dad.

Nico hurried south. It was a clear day, but as he got closer, he noticed a single dark cloud hanging over Temple Hill. He didn't know what that meant—maybe a portent from his father? Or Jupiter. Or any of the dozens of other gods with monuments there. He wondered if they had to use a scheduling app to get their portents on the calendar. *It's my turn for a storm cloud! I booked today for a flock of ravens! No, Tuesdays are rainbows!*

Nico climbed the hill, past altars, monuments, and statues of Roman gods who all seemed to follow him with their eyes. It seemed so long ago when Nico had shadow-traveled to Pluto's shrine, cheating his way out of the Fifth Cohort's morning run. Strangely, he found it more difficult to find the place on foot. He took a wrong turn at the shrine of Juventas, and then he had to double back and follow the Path of the Nine Muses until he reached his destination—the modest dark mausoleum built into the side of the hill. As always, Nico admired the roof covered in bones and diamonds. He wondered if he could get a pair of boots to match.

At the entrance, he hesitated. He still remembered falling asleep in front of those double doors, dreaming of a voice from the Underworld. *Go home, Nico di Angelo! Keep aiding and abetting criminals, and we'll find you guilty as well!*

But now he knew that voice belonged to Pirithous. And he was not going to let some arrogant dead guy in a Halloween mask keep him from his father's altar.

Nico had every right to be here. He had come to seek help for Hazel, another of his father's children.

He pushed open the doors, and light rushed into the dark space. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. The space was no bigger than a walk-in closet. Unadorned pine walls supported a barrel vault ceiling of rough-cut stone. A single bench with red velvet cushions faced a small altar made of black marble.

He approached the altar and found a few offerings covered in cobwebs: a smooth gray rock, a pile of silver denarii, and a desiccated pomegranate. The last one made him smile. He hoped his stepmother, Persephone, was doing well.

Nico had given a lot of thought about what to offer. Sacrifices were important if you wanted to get a god's attention. He doubted Hades would settle for a gray stone from his son, like, *Hi, Dad. I saw this rock and thought of you.*

Nico needed something much more personal, more precious to him. He lifted his arm and stared at the gash on the sleeve of his bomber jacket. Maybe it was time to say good-bye to an old friend. He took off the jacket, folded it, and set it on the altar.

"Dad, Lord Hades, Pluto…"

Off to a great start, Nico told himself. *You've named your dad three times.*

He sat on the bench, trying not to feel exposed in just his T-shirt and jeans. "I hope you know how much that jacket means to me. It's been with me through…well, pretty much everything. It's like half my personality at this point. I hope it shows you how much I need your help."

He took a deep breath to settle his jangling nerves. Savannah was right. This *wasn't* easy.

"I don't know what to do," he continued. "I don't know where Hazel is. I *think* she's still alive, but I don't know for sure. I'm pretty sure she's in trouble. And it's eating away at me."

Unsurprisingly, Nico was met with silence, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I know you're busy," he continued, "what with running the Underworld and all, but I'm hoping you can listen. Maybe even offer me some advice. I just…I want to know there's hope, and we're not doing all this for nothing."

A gentle breeze blew through Nico's hair.

"It's not for nothing," said a deep voice behind him.

Nico turned. His father was standing just inside the doors. His black hair was cropped short, accentuating the gauntness of his face. His diamond tie pin seemed bigger than the state of Rhode Island. In his sharp black wool suit and glossy black leather shoes, he looked like an usher at a funeral.

"Father." Nico rose. "You're…you're *here*."

Hades raised an eyebrow. "You don't have to sound quite so shocked. You did make an offering and summon me."

"Well…yes. But you've never shown up before."

Hades gave him a thin smile. "Perhaps you've never offered me such a fine jacket before." He spread his arms. "Come here, son."

Not quite believing what was happening, Nico crossed over to Hades, and the god pulled him in for an embrace. His father smelled of pine and wet earth. He held his son for a long time. Nico felt as if a thousand new Cocoa Puffs were forming inside his stomach.

At last, Hades released him. He gripped Nico's shoulders and studied his face.

"It is good to see you again so soon," Hades said. "After your mother died…well, as you know, I spent too long away from you and Bianca. I thought that was best for your safety, but I was wrong. That distance…it made me bitter, indifferent, disconnected. If I am to remain the one who oversees the Underworld, I must do a better job of staying in touch with the world above. I would like to make a habit of more frequent visits with you."

Nico swallowed back the lump in his throat. He'd never felt so close to his father, but the feeling was undercut by what Hades had said: *If I am to remain the one who oversees the Underworld…* That seemed like a darker portent than any storm cloud.

"I'd like that, too," he said.

Hades's dark eyes glinted like onyx. "Sit, my child. Tell me what is troubling you, and I will see what I can do."

Nico felt like a broken dam. He started talking, and the story spilled out of him, leaving him breathless by the end.

Hades placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let me calm your mind a bit, Nico. Your half sister is very much alive."

Nico's relief was so immense tears sprang to his eyes. "Thank you. I don't think I could deal with another loss."

Hades examined him. "I am not so sure of that," he said. "I don't want you to suffer, but I also think you are possibly the most resilient of my children. You seem able to deal with *anything*."

"I—I appreciate that, Father. But sometimes I get tired of having to deal with everything."

"I'm not human, but I believe you just described what it is to be a mortal."

Nico groaned. "I don't suppose you'd consider making me immortal, then."

Hades chuckled. "The life of a god is not easy either. We face hard decisions all the time, and we face them eternally. My punishment of Pirithous is a good example. One might argue that I set all this in motion."

"Is he really as bad as he seems?"

Hades frowned. "Let me put it this way: Pirithous's fatal flaw is self-importance. He believes he is much grander, more powerful, and more deserving than he actually is. He is a fool who expects the world to cater to him, and he complains of injustice when it does not."

"So…I shouldn't take him seriously?"

"I didn't say that." Hades's tone turned grave. "Fools can be dangerous, especially if they convince others of their importance. Look at what Pirithous has achieved with this Court of the Dead. Even minor gods have flocked to his cause, convinced that he can order things better than the Olympians—better than *me*, to be precise."

Hades's eyes momentarily flickered with a terrible darkness, and there was a chill in the temple.

Nico was afraid to ask another question, but he felt like he needed to. "So you knew what Pirithous was up to? But you didn't want to…"

"Stop it?" Hades laughed without humor. "Ancient laws restrain the Olympians, Nico, and for good reason. If we tried to intervene every time someone blasphemed Olympus, or started a war, or even created an uprising among the minor gods, as Pirithous has done, we would quickly tear the universe apart. That is what Pirithous never understood. Judges of the dead must be fair and evenhanded. They must be able to see the entirety of a person's life before making a ruling. And they must allow latitude for exceptions. Hazel's time in Asphodel, for example, was a just sentence, no matter how much I disliked it. But when you freed her, that was *also* just. Pirithous believes everyone who does not behave in a way he deems proper deserves permanent punishment. The only exception, of course, is himself."

The god sighed loudly. “I lifted his punishment myself, you know, once I deemed that he had suffered long enough. I freed him from his rock, thinking he would see the power of mercy, maybe even discover humility. He did not. I hope you and your fellow heroes stop him. But I myself”—he spread his hands—“cannot act unless the entire Olympian Council deems that the gods are threatened. And you know that the council rarely agrees on anything.”

Nico wasn’t surprised. He’d dealt with the gods long enough to know their limits and their constant bickering. But he wasn’t angry, either. He appreciated his father even being willing to talk to him.

“Can I ask…” he said, “what did Pirithous do to deserve his punishment?”

Hades stared at his altar. Maybe it was Nico’s imagination, but he seemed focused on the desiccated pomegranate.

“That knowledge will come to you soon enough,” said the god. “I don’t trust myself to speak of it, or I will become angry.”

Nico decided not to push. “I don’t suppose you could tell me where Hazel is?”

Hades smiled. “That knowledge, too, is already coming your way, my son. Just because I cannot involve myself directly in your struggles does not mean I am not working behind the scenes, arranging some…happy coincidences.”

He stood and brushed off the front of his suit. “I should return to the Underworld. I have faith that Hazel can handle herself until you reach her. And then, together, you will bring Pirithous to whatever justice *you* deem best. You and Hazel have both made me immensely proud.”

Nico felt a comforting warmth encircle him, which shouldn’t have been possible in such a cold, dark crypt. “I’m probably pressing my luck,” he said, “but before you go…one last question?”

“Yes?”

“What should I do about Savannah?”

It wasn’t until he’d asked that he realized how much her struggle had been weighing on him. A small thing, maybe, compared to all their other problems, but Nico saw so much of himself in her.

Hades seemed to disappear into his thoughts. “Interesting you should ask about her, a girl you barely know. It shows you have a good heart.”

“How do I keep her safe, but also keep Asterion and *his* friends safe?”

“My son, two truths can exist at the same time. It is true that Savannah is haunted by what the empousai did to her parents. It is also true that Asterion and his friends have chosen to change and live a different life. You must find a way to allow them all to heal.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Nico said. “But some of the campers here are having a hard time adjusting.”

“But they *are* adjusting, no? Aren’t you training them to pair up with your cacodemons to rescue everyone from Pirithous?”

Nico scowled. “I don’t like it when you’re right.”

“I thought you would have gotten used to godly righteousness by now.”

“Did you just tell a *joke*?”

“Who, me? The god of the dead?” Nico thought he caught Hades smirking. “Surely not. At any rate, you and your boyfriend helped change the world. It sounds like you feel responsible for the ways that change has manifested, which I understand, but I feel compelled to remind you that you do not have to do this alone.”

“Have you been talking to Mr. D? You sound exactly like him.”

Hades let out a low chuckle. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I do appreciate the way Dionysus has been taking care of you. If I may give you a last bit of advice…I believe what Savannah is missing is closure. I can’t say she’ll get justice, because this world is so complicated. The empousai who took her parents could go their entire existence without ever knowing the pain they caused. But every living soul passes through my realm, and if I have seen anything that begins to take such pain away, it is honesty, empathy, and care. Don’t think only of how you can defeat Pirithous. Think of how you and your friends can help repair the damage that has been done.”

Nico started to answer, but Hades raised a finger. “Any answer you provide now would not be thoughtful enough. Give it time, Nico.”

“Thank you.”

Hades nodded. “Now, since fair is fair, I have one more thing to ask *you* before I head back downstairs. How *are* your…Cocoa Puffs? Is that what you’re calling them now?”

“It’s a lot better than their ‘technical’ name.”

“There is nothing wrong with the word *cacodemon*.”

Nico scoffed. "*You* try saying it ten times in a row. But…yeah, they're wonderful. I'm sure they're currently having the times of their lives tormenting our demigods-in-training."

"Hmm. You are the first person to ever become a steward of so many cacodemons. I hope you take the responsibility seriously."

"I do. I kinda see them like my own children. Especially when they're confusing me."

Hades's brow furrowed. "How so?"

"Sometimes, I'm thrown by the feelings they give me. They're not what I'm expecting."

Hades nodded. "That does sound like having children. I know you must think of me as a distant, impenetrable god who isn't tempted by the whims of emotion, but even we have feelings. Look at Dionysus, for example. He's just as chaotic as all of you."

Nico frowned. "Thanks?"

The god placed a hand on Nico's shoulder. "I have been alive for a very, very long time, Nico. I confess that life *still* surprises me. Not always in the ways I want, of course. That's the gamble of existence. But I suspect the cacodemons are learning to be what you *need* them to be, even if the feelings and memories they show you are uncomfortable. Talk to that boyfriend of yours. He is a son of Apollo. I'm sure whenever you need it, he will help remind you of the brighter side of life."

Nico smiled. "Even if it's the inferior side."

"My child of darkness." Hades pulled Nico in for one last hug. "Continue to trust your instincts—they have guided you well thus far."

And with that, Hades evaporated into shadows.

Nico sat there for a moment, basking in the warmth of the experience he'd just had. Maybe he wasn't as lost as he'd thought.

He stood to leave…and then he saw that his bomber jacket was now neatly folded over the back of the bench. He glanced at the altar. Empty. He picked up the jacket and discovered there was no longer a gash down one of the sleeves. It had been mended as good as new.

Tears leaped to his eyes. "Thanks, Dad," he said. "Love you, too."

He made his way to the doors and emerged into the daylight. As he did, someone stumbled back.

"Sorry!" said Deion. "I promise I didn't listen!" Then he frowned. "Well, I only heard the end part. Was that *actually* your father?"

Nico nodded. “Yeah. Made a rare appearance.”

“Wow,” Deion said, casting his eyes downward. “I hope I get to meet my mother someday. She’s Aurora, goddess of the dawn? Which is weird, since I’m usually a late sleeper. What did you guys talk about?”

“Uh…”

“Never mind,” said Deion quickly. “I have a bad habit of saying whatever I’m thinking.”

“No, that’s okay. I admire it! Better than keeping everything to yourself.”

“I guess. Yazan says it’s going to get me in trouble someday.”

Nico couldn’t help but laugh a little. “Maybe. But you’ll learn to balance it. And there’s nothing wrong with a little trouble.” His brow furrowed. “Wait, why were you on Temple Hill, anyway?”

“Oh, right!” Deion’s eyes widened. “Will needs you. Savannah told us you went this way, so I came to find you.”

“Do you know what’s up?”

“Someone showed up at the entrance to camp,” he said gravely. “They claim to know where Hazel is.”

Hazel was exhausted.

She plopped down on the nearest bench, her breathing labored, and wiped the sweat from her brow. “I need a break,” she wheezed.

Asterion knelt and scooped up a twisted chunk of Celestial bronze Hazel had just summoned from the earth.

“Please rest, my friend,” he said. “I will get this to the drakons.”

He lumbered off, and Hazel let relief wash over her. Ever since Naomi Solace had left, Hazel had been conjuring precious metals to be melted down by the baby drakon—who, fortunately, could breathe fire—and then fashioned into weapons and tools by a collective of Cyclopes and telkhines.

As far as Hazel knew, this was the first time Cyclopes and telkhines had ever collaborated, since usually they were rivals in the niche market of magical blacksmiths. Even without a proper forge, they’d already produced some amazing things. The Laistrygonian giants were presently using iron shovels tipped with emerald blades to try digging underneath the boundary wall. So far they’d been unsuccessful, but at least it had given everyone something to focus on. It had gotten them working together rather than staying in their isolated groups and thinking about who they would have to kill and eat once the food ran out.

On the downside, the food *was* running out. The increased activity burned more calories and oxygen, and additional mythics kept arriving. Hazel just hoped that the prison didn’t have a floor, or that the walls didn’t extend all the way down to the Underworld. That seemed like the sort of cruel joke Pirithous would play.

Quinoa fluttered up to her, holding a small bowl made of sapphire. “I got you some water,” he said. Then, in a quieter voice: “There isn’t much left. We’re down to one working fountain now.”

That was not great news. She was tempted to tell Quinoa to save the water, but she didn’t want to rebuff his kindness. Also, she was thirsty. “Thank you, my friend.”

She drank it down in a few gulps. A dull ache settled in behind her eyes. She’d been pushing herself a little too hard, but she *had* to. No one else could do what she could. She wanted to feel useful, to prove to the others that she was here to help.

Still, most of the mythics had avoided her. She was the only demigod in this enclosure, and aside from her friends, they all viewed her with suspicion. She couldn't blame them. Demigods like her had been hunting and killing their kind for millennia.

So she summoned gem after gem, chunk after chunk of metal ore, hoping she could begin to win them over.

She handed the empty bowl back to Quinoa. "How's it going out there?"

"We have forged many shovels and trowels," he said. "Now we're working on knives and spears for those who wish to wield them."

Hazel frowned. It didn't seem like a great idea to arm a bunch of suspicious mythics who were so close to turning on one another. Then again, she was the only one who had arrived here with a sword, so maybe it wasn't her place to judge.

"I hope it doesn't come to that," she said. "Our main goal is to get out of here."

"Hmph." The karpos scowled. "My main goal is to bring some emerald trowels back to the kindergartners so we can start our classroom garden. But I guess getting out of here works, too." Quinoa grumbled to himself as he wandered off.

Had Hazel done something wrong? She wasn't sure—Quinoa was naturally grumpy, so maybe he was just being himself. She lay flat on the bench as her heart rate ramped up.

Calm down, she told herself. *He's not mad at you. And you'll figure this out*.

She stared up through the leaves of the sycamore above her. If she just concentrated on the clear blue winter sky, she could almost convince herself she wasn't trapped inside an invisible cage. She might think this was one of the most beautiful days of her life. Beyond the boundary, people were going in and out of the museums, or jogging by, or walking their dogs. It all looked so *normal*.

Nothing about Hazel's life had been normal. What must it be like, she wondered, to not have to think about vengeful judges from the Underworld, or how you were going to save your friends and possibly the entire world?

Exhaustion pressed against her consciousness. She wanted to doze off, but her mind buzzed with anxiety. She didn't like feeling trapped like this. She wished she had some demigod power that could shatter the boundary.

She was so deep in thought that she didn't notice Asterion until his shadow fell over her face.

"Do you need a nap?" he asked. "I can watch over you."

Hazel sat up. “Thanks, Asterion. I do, but…I don’t know if I could sleep. My mind is racing at a thousand miles an hour.”

He nodded. “I am familiar with this feeling. I spent much of my time inside the Labyrinth wrestling with my thoughts.”

She grimaced. “I hadn’t even considered that. Here I am, freaking out over being confined for twenty-four hours, and you experienced a *lifetime* of this.”

Asterion sat on the ground in front of the bench so they were eye to eye with each other. “Do not denigrate or minimize your experience, Hazel. Being stuck like this…it is always distressing, no matter the duration.”

Her mind dredged up an unwelcome memory. “You’re right. The last time I felt so trapped…it was right before I died.”

She didn’t share the story with many people, but she told Asterion about the cavern on Resurrection Island in Alaska, where Gaea had ordered her and her mother, Marie, to build a spire of gems that was supposed to give birth to Alcyoneus, Gaea’s oldest giant son. Hazel had worked herself to exhaustion, summoning precious stones from the earth day after day.

“I felt so powerless,” she said. “I couldn’t break my mother out of Gaea’s spell. Eventually, I had to collapse the whole cavern and sacrifice my life to stop it all.”

Asterion rubbed his thumbs and forefingers, as if missing the feel of his knitting needles. “We have a lot more in common than I previously thought. I see my own anger and sadness in your story. And in feeling like a pawn of someone else.”

“I think that’s why what Pirithous is doing enrages me so much,” she said. “I’m being judged *again*!” Heat rushed to her face. “I hate this.”

“I do as well,” said Asterion.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. “You know, it just occurred to me how much I’ve been trying to prove to the world that I’m a good person. Even a few minutes ago, before you came back, that’s what I was thinking about: how I could prove to all the mythics here that I’m good and on their side.”

“But that is understandable. Many of them view demigods with suspicion.”

“It’s more than that, though. I think *I’ve* believed that I’m not a good person for a long time. You know, when I was a kid, I was made fun of *all* the time. By kids *and* adults.”

Asterion grunted. “Why?”

“I was judged for who my mother was, for what I looked like, for not knowing my father. It’s been the same thing over and over my whole life. So many people don’t seem to want to get to know who I really am. They decide who I am for me.”

She couldn’t help it anymore. Her body shook as she let loose a sob. Then she quickly wiped away the tears on her face and tried her best to hold back the rush of emotions she was feeling. “I can’t believe I’m crying in front of the former Minotaur,” she said.

Asterion laughed heartily. “I feel honored. Please do not resist expressing yourself. I have spent almost my whole life putting forth an image that was not true. I thought I did not have a choice.”

“I know what you mean. Even looking back, I’m not sure there was anything I could or would have done differently. And more time in the Underworld wouldn’t have changed that.”

He nodded. “You are not the only one who ruminates on their past. I still wonder if I am ‘good.’ If the things I do now can ever make up for what I did when I was the Minotaur.”

“But did you have any other choice back then?”

“Perhaps not,” he said. “I could have chosen death, I suppose, but that was not my inclination. I felt I still had something to offer the world.”

“You do!” said Hazel. “And I didn’t want to choose death either. But I also didn’t want to have to act like a monster to survive.”

“Your hand was *forced*,” he said sharply. “But no longer. You and I…we are free.”

“Free? Even in this cage?”

Asterion shrugged. “I no longer have the responsibilities and expectations that come with being something that was created to terrify. I can pursue my passions. I can make friends. I can show other mythics that they are allowed to be something else.”

“And I love that for you!” Hazel said, laughing.

“I also recognize that this does not mean my journey is ‘done,’ so to speak. And I do not think you should view your own life that way either. We have the rest of our lives to choose our paths, to be in community with others, to spread joy and love. It is not fair, Hazel, to hold yourself to a standard that is impossible. We are not perfect, and we can never be perfect. As for this cage…I have been in many. And I believe all cages are meant for breaking. We will survive this.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she said. “Gods, now I want to get everyone out of here even more.”

“I do too. But for now…rest, Hazel Levesque. You have done amazing work, even if others do not see it. *I* see it. And I hope you know…you’ve made a friend for life in me.”

She reached out and took his hand. “I’m glad I let you into Camp Jupiter. You’re the best.”

Hazel lay back on the bench as she was overcome with lightheadedness. She focused on slowing her heart rate, but it was easier said than done. Her mind wouldn’t let go of the realization that was growing within her: the oxygen in this prison was running out.

Asterion remained at her side as she drifted in and out of consciousness. She wasn’t sure she ever fully fell asleep, but when she next opened her eyes, it was because she heard two voices. Asterion was standing now, talking in hushed tones with Arielle.

“Did you get any details?” Asterion asked the empousa.

“Not many,” Arielle admitted. “I was just sparring with a dracaena named Sssssandra, teaching them how to stab an enemy if we ever got the chance—which was very satisfying, by the way. And they said—”

Hazel sat up. “What’s going on?”

Arielle turned, her fiery hair guttering in the thinning air. “Hazel. Sorry to wake you, but I thought you should hear this. One of our newest arrivals just told me something Pirithous was bragging about during their trial. I think I know how Pirithous has gotten all those minor deities on his side. And why he wants to make your father appear when the Mist breaks.”

Hazel groaned. “How much am I going to hate this?”

Arielle’s face twisted up. “Apparently, he has a secret weapon—something specifically designed to trap a god.”

Orcus swooped down to join Nico, Will, and Deion just before they entered the tunnel on the Camp Jupiter side. The griffin landed on Deion's shoulder.

"I am practicing my surveillance," he announced. "I did not see any others following the human. Also, I did not get stuck on the highway this time!"

"Great job, buddy!" Deion said. "So…you're sure this person is a human?"

"She seems to be," said Orcus. "Apparently, she took an Uber to Tunnel Road, right above the sentry post, and walked down the side of the hill from there. She nearly scared our sentries to death. But perhaps this is the Mist again, and we're about to be tricked!"

The griffin sounded weirdly excited by the possibility. Maybe he really was getting comfortable being part of Camp Jupiter.

"We'll see," Will said. He looked down at Loneliness, who was harnessed in the special pouch on Will's chest. "You all right there, little guy?"

The fuzzball cooed at Will.

As they headed into the tunnel, the rest of the Puffs bobbed along behind them, jostling and wrestling with one another. Nico felt like his nerves were doing exactly the same thing inside him: chaotically bouncing up and down. Were they about to be fooled again? Was this another trap from Laverna or Pirithous?

He recalled his father's recent words: *Continue to trust your instincts*.

That would've been great advice if Nico felt like he *did* trust his instincts. Instead, he was constantly second-guessing himself. Or was he second-guessing an instinct he should pay attention to? Or…

Nico decided to shelve that internal conversation. It would get him nothing but a headache. He was trying to guard against this human visitor without knowing anything about them, which wasn't helpful at all. He reached for Will's hand.

"Everything okay?" Will asked quietly.

Nico hooked his index finger around Will's pinkie. "It will be."

Still, the walk through the tunnel itself was nerve-racking. The closer they got to the double doors, the more furiously Nico's heart beat.

"We're going to find Hazel," said Will. "No matter what."

Nico nodded mutely.

When they reached the western doors, Deion flung them open, and light filled the tunnel. Nico saw the outline of someone standing just outside. It took him a moment to make out Frank.

"Thanks for coming," the praetor said.

Nico wondered how Frank had gotten there so fast. As the eagle flew, it was a mile or more from the Field of Mars. Then Nico remembered Frank could literally turn into an eagle, so maybe he'd answered his own question.

Nico stepped onto the sentry platform, shielding his eyes. "Where are they?"

Frank pointed to the other side, where two guards—Claudia and Janice from the Fourth—faced a tall human woman with curly blond hair and a sort of glam country-singer outfit. Nico couldn't help but admire her maroon leather jacket.

He'd expected to find the sentries holding the unknown visitor at spear-point. Instead, they were laughing at a story she'd just told.

"No way," said Janice. "You *met* Beyoncé?"

The visitor grinned. "I mean, it was really brief, but she was so nice. 'Texas Hold 'Em'—incredible, right?"

Will squeezed Nico's hand. *Hard*.

The next word out of his mouth was the last thing Nico expected. *"Mom?!"*

Will rushed forward, plowing straight between Claudia and Janice and into his mother's open arms.

"Oh my gods, Will!" the woman sobbed, holding him tight.

Nico's jaw hit the ground. He wanted to say, *That's your* mom*?* But he had lost the ability to use words.

Will pulled back. "Mom, what are you doing here? I knew you had some Bay Area shows this week, but—"

The woman laughed, and Nico instantly heard how similar she sounded to Will. “I was just walking through Golden Gate Park, minding my own business. I had no idea you were even on the West Coast! And then I met your lovely friend Hazel.”

“Hazel?” Frank stepped forward urgently. “She’s all right? And she’s in Golden Gate Park?”

He looked so fervent, Nico was afraid he might turn into a ram and head-butt Will’s mom until she coughed up answers.

Will held up his hand for a pause. “I want to hear all about that. But first, introductions. Guys, this is Naomi Solace, my mom. Mom, you’ve met Claudia and Janice. This is Deion, and Orcus, and Frank.” He turned toward Nico and smiled. “And this grumpy ball of darkness is—”

She didn’t let Will finish. If Nico hadn’t known any better, he would’ve sworn Will’s mom had superhuman speed, because she ran toward him, squealing with delight, and pulled him into a warm hug.

“Nico!” she said. “I’m so excited to finally meet you. Thank you for loving my son.”

Nico had to force himself not to disintegrate into ugly-happy crying. First, a loving conversation with his father. Now the warmest greeting he’d ever received—from Will’s mom, no less. He realized this must be what Hades had meant about arranging a “happy coincidence,” and he decided he owed the lord of the Underworld an excellent Father’s Day card this year.

“It’s—it’s nice to meet you, too,” he said into Naomi’s shoulder. Her guitar-shaped dangle earring dug into the side of his face, but he didn’t mind.

Naomi released him and then looked down at the Puffs bouncing around his feet. “And who are these cuties?”

The Puffs all froze in shock and stared at her, as if wondering *Who is this woman and why does she have such excellent taste?*

“Mom, priorities!” said Will.

But Naomi insisted on meeting and greeting everyone personally—including Orcus the griffin and each of Nico’s emotional demons.

Frank looked like he was about to cry. “I—I’m very glad you’re here, Mrs. Solace, but about Hazel—”

“Oh, you are all so *cute*. I’m so happy to meet you!” She pulled Frank into a hug next. “But I’m Naomi. Please, *please* don’t call me Mrs. Solace or Ms. Solace. Just Naomi will do. Now, about your brave friend Hazel…”

Naomi told them how she'd run into Hazel in the plaza outside the de Young Museum, where she was apparently being held inside a massive dodecahedron cage with several hundred mythic friends.

Nico had never felt such dramatic emotional whiplash. "So Asterion is alive, too? And Arielle and Quinoa?"

"This is amazing news!" Orcus cried. "I must go tell the others!" He launched himself from Deion's shoulder and took off for Camp Jupiter.

Naomi smiled. "I like him. Somehow, I thought griffins were bigger, but he's just about purse-size! Adorable."

"I feel like my brain is going to explode," said Deion.

Will put his hands on either side of his mom's face. "Mom, please focus. One thing at a time! You're sure Hazel said dodecahedrons?"

"Yes, I— Well, let me check." Naomi pulled out her cell phone and read something from it. "Yes. Four dodecahedrons. And they're running out of food, and water, and air. That's important."

Frank groaned. "We need to leave immediately."

"Hold on," Nico said. "We still need to gather the rest of the team, plus debrief with Johan and Semele. They might've found some more info on Pirithous. Can we bring Naomi inside Camp Jupiter? Do we have your permission?"

"Of course," Frank said without hesitation. "Anyone who can help us bring our friends home is a friend of Camp Jupiter."

"Oh, I'm so excited!" Naomi said. "Is this like Camp Half-Blood?"

Deion looked offended. "Uh, no. We are far superior to the Greek camp."

"Please," said Nico. "You've never stepped foot in Camp Half-Blood."

"Anyway…" Frank intervened. "Claudia, Janice—good job. Stay on duty. The rest of you, let's go."

The sentries looked disappointed that they couldn't follow Naomi and hear more of her stories, but they glumly went back to their posts.

Frank gestured to the tunnel entrance. "Ladies first?"

"Oh, this is so exciting!" Naomi grinned at Will. "I know your demigod life is your own, but I've always wanted to see a little more of it."

He blushed. "Well…prepare yourself, Mom. This might be a lot."

Nico was pretty sure that nothing would be “a lot” for Naomi Solace.

In just an hour, it seemed like Naomi had won over half of Camp Jupiter with her bubbly personality and the need to introduce herself to practically everyone she came across, including the fustiest of the Lares. Even Vitellius Reticulus called her “delightful.” She was one of the most rambunctious people Nico had ever met, and he was *obsessed* with her.

They made a pit stop at the mess hall because Naomi wanted to see how the wind spirits delivered food. Nico left the Puffs there to feed on table scraps—their new favorite hobby—and then they headed down the Via Principalis, where they met Semele with Orcus in tow. Will’s mom had a field day with both the concept and the reality of an eidolon.

“This is all so exciting!” Naomi said. “Eidolons and griffins and ancestral ghosts wandering the camp…It makes me want to write a song.”

Frank gave her a nervous look. “Uh…the camp’s existence is technically a secret, so—”

“Oh, honey,” she said. “You can’t suppress inspiration when it strikes.”

“Don’t worry, Frank,” said Will. “She writes in metaphors. It’s not like she’ll publish directions to the camp.”

“Your love like tiny griffin wings,” Naomi sang. “*An eidolon to pull my strings.* Hmm, I’ll workshop it!”

“I think that’s excellent,” said Orcus.

“It needs work,” said Semele, but Nico sensed gentle amusement in her voice.

Frank didn’t seem entirely convinced, but he let it go. He sent Deion to gather the rest of their squad—Lavinia, Lucius, Savannah, and Yazan—and then led the group into the principia. Johan was waiting for them with a stack of old documents and a fresh pot of tea. Naomi gushed over the way Johan had organized the bookshelves, which made the blemmyae glow with pride.

“These are mostly camp records,” he explained. “Admissions, awards, organizational details…that sort of thing. Dating back hundreds of years!”

“Wow,” Naomi said. “I could spend an entire week reading these.”

Will gave Nico a pointed look. “Thank you! I thought the same thing.”

Nico crossed his arms. “I hope you know just how bizarre this is for me. You and your mom are barely different people. She’s just a bit extra.”

As if on cue, they both smiled ear to ear.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Naomi. “And you’re right. Will does take after me the most.”

That boggled Nico’s mind. In the equation Naomi Solace + Apollo, Apollo had contributed the *calmer* half of Will’s personality.

Naomi turned to Johan again. “By the way, this Darjeeling blend is excellent.”

Johan’s enormous eyes teared up. “It is so rare to meet a fellow tea enthusiast. Would you like to tour the archive downstairs? I’ve just re-cataloged our entire collection of magic dangly straps!”

“Maybe later, Johan,” said Frank, who seemed a bit in over his head. “We have to do some planning.”

“Oh.” Johan pouted with his entire chest. “Of course, Praetor.”

Naomi winked at the blemmyae. “But I’m sure the dangly straps are amazing.”

The group circled around the praetors’ desk.

“Okay, Mom, tell us *everything* you can about what you saw and heard,” said Will. “No matter how small the detail. Everything is going to help us.”

Naomi launched into a thorough and animated recounting of her morning in the park—the mythics, the barrier, her talk with Hazel and Asterion. Nico realized that she was a natural storyteller, so it made sense that she related stories through music for a living. He also loved getting to see his boyfriend interact with his mom. It was like the last piece of the Will Solace puzzle had finally fallen into place.

When Naomi was done, Semele was the first to speak. “Breaking the Mist…Is such a thing possible?”

Johan sipped his tea, which he managed to do daintily, despite the tiny cup and his huge mouth. “I would have to do more research. The closest parallel I can think of is the Trojan War. So many gods and spirits were involved on both sides of that battle, the Mist became unreliable. Mortals ended up seeing the gods in action. Rivers boiled from the intense magic. The earth shattered. Storms raged for months. Homer wrote a book about it.”

Frank scowled. “I’d like to avoid that scenario, and also not have a book written about us. Why would Pirithous *want* to get Pluto’s attention like that? It seems…suicidal.”

“He must have a plan,” Nico said. “Some way to force Hades’s—er, Pluto’s—hand. Maybe he wants to threaten him or imprison him somehow?”

“Ah…” Johan patted his stack of dusty manuscripts. “I don’t believe a dodecahedron would have that power. Nor do I know what plan Pirithous might have, exactly. But I did find out more about him. He was the best friend of Theseus. Pirithous was considered by many to be his equal in skill and strength.”

“I know about Theseus,” Naomi volunteered. “He killed the Minotaur, right? I mean…your friend Asterion. But I’ve never heard of Pirithous.”

Johan poured her more of his Darjeeling blend. “Indeed, that is part of the problem. Pirithous has been nearly forgotten. In life, he always felt like he was in Theseus’s shadow. No one took him seriously. The two friends once made a pact to help each other win wives, no matter what it took. Theseus chose Helen of Sparta.”

Will’s eyes widened. “As in ‘the face that launched a thousand ships,’ the most beautiful woman who ever lived—*that* Helen?”

Johan gave him a bow-nod. “Pirithous helped Theseus kidnap her. Then Pirithous felt the need to one-up Theseus…but whom could he choose who was even more beautiful and difficult to capture?” The blemmyae paused dramatically, waiting for their guesses.

“I don’t know,” Naomi said at last. “But I’m loving the drama.”

Johan turned to Nico. “He chose Persephone, the wife of your father.”

Suddenly Nico was glad for his hot cup of tea, because his whole body felt cold. “That explains why he has a grudge against my dad. I assume the kidnapping failed, and Hades punished them?”

“Quite so,” said the blemmyae. “Theseus and Pirithous stopped in the Fields of Asphodel to rest on their way to the palace. They fell asleep on a large slab of rock. When they woke, they had both sunk halfway into the stone. Hades left them there for daring to try kidnapping his wife. Eventually, Hercules came along….”

Will huffed in irritation. “It’s *always* Hercules.”

“He freed Theseus,” Johan continued. “But when he tried to pull out Pirithous, the entire Underworld shook. Hades would not let him be released, so Hercules had to leave him there. And so Pirithous remained…forever, according to the stories.”

Naomi sipped her tea with great appreciation. “I am *so* writing a song about that.”

The rest of the group sat in pensive silence.

“Okay,” Frank said, “we know why this guy is angry. He thinks he was punished unfairly. Now he wants to punish literally everyone else, especially Pluto and every soul and mythic in his kingdom. He wants to set himself up as the ultimate judge of the dead. He’s got delusions of grandeur.”

Semele’s column of smoke drifted across the table, mixing with the steam from the teapot. “That does not make him any less dangerous. He has minor gods in his employ. He has managed to imprison hundreds. We must rescue our friends, but we must assume the Court of the Dead has a plan for this…and tricks they have not yet revealed.”

“So what’s the plan?” asked Naomi.

Will frowned. “The plan is that *you* will stay far, far away from this, Mom.”

“What?” she protested. “Are you really trying to tell your mother she can’t come along?”

Will pressed his lips together, and despite the grim situation, Nico had to hold back a laugh.

“Ms. Solace—” Frank began.

“Naomi.”

He sighed. “Naomi, this isn’t exactly a field trip. We’re going to face *real* danger.”

“Hmph.” She sipped more tea. “You’ve clearly never been a woman on a concert tour. I can handle myself.”

“I like her,” said Semele. “She’s scrappy.”

“Mom…” Will squirmed. “Like you said, this is my world. I have demigod abilities to help keep me alive, but you…I don’t want you getting hurt.”

Will’s mom was quiet for a moment. “Okay,” she said. “I hear you. Let me at least hitch a ride with you back to the city. How are you getting there?”

It was Frank’s turn to squirm. “We have a Chevy Express van….”

“Well, there you go!” Naomi said. “My first truck was a Chevy! I’ll be your wheel girl! And right there’s another song—‘Wheel Girl.’ My goodness, I’m gonna get a whole album out of this.” She started typing notes into her phone.

Will wrinkled his nose but finally nodded in agreement.

“All right, then,” Frank said. “As far as breaking this dodecahedron cage…”

“Oh, that part is easy enough from the outside,” Johan assured him. “We will have to be careful, of course, but it can be done. I must assume, however, that as soon as the cage is broken, the Court of the Dead will know. And they will come to investigate.”

“And then I will eat them all!” Orcus exclaimed. “Er, one at a time, of course.”

Naomi leaned over to her son. “Is this the kinda stuff you deal with regularly? It’s very exciting!”

“I mean…not *all* the time,” he said. “At camp, I’m mostly teaching field-medic skills or making sure campers get to bed on time. This dramatic stuff only happens, like, once a year.”

“Twice,” said Nico. “Tartarus was only a few months ago.”

“Three times,” said Frank. “We defeated Nero just prior to that.”

Will’s smile was eroding. “So…yeah! Not all the time.”

Naomi raised an eyebrow. “Well, we’ll talk more about this later.”

His face flushed red again. “Yes, Mom.”

Nico had never seen his boyfriend blush so many times in one day. It was the greatest gift he could imagine.

“So,” said Semele, “when do we leave?”

“I need to stop by the armory at some point,” said Will. “To stock up on arrows and get my bow.”

“Let’s meet in half an hour, then,” said Frank. “I’ll have the demigods ready. Nico, gather the Cocoa Puffs, okay?”

“Half an hour,” said Nico. “We’ll be there.”

With that, the group dispersed. Will and Nico led Naomi back toward the mess hall to collect the cacodemons before they could completely gorge themselves on table scraps. If they went into nap mode, they’d be useless for the rest of the day.

“Semele seems nice,” Naomi mused. “Don’t you think so, Will?”

He smiled. “Mom, you know I like pretty much *everyone*.”

She kissed his cheek. “Just like me.”

Nico smiled, and not only because of the great company. For the first time in days, the hope he was clinging to felt *very* real.

Hazel was thinking about secret weapons.

She wished she had one.

Arielle had collected several reports from newly arrived mythics, all of whom claimed that Pirithous had bragged in court about his power over the gods. Supposedly, he had something that made him unbeatable. He relished the chance to make Pluto appear and put the lord of the Underworld on trial. Unfortunately, details were scarce about what this secret weapon might be. Hazel guessed that was what made it "secret."

Still, thinking about it was not helping her headache.

The situation in the park was becoming dire. What had once been scattered groups of mythics was now one giant crowd, as if a concert were about to start at the band shell. The air was humid and stale. Everyone was brushing up against one another. Tempers were short.

Hazel watched from her bench as a centaur shoved an empousa out of the way at the central fountain. She fell into the damp basin, while a harpy swooped down and raked the centaur's back with her sharp claws.

"That's my friend!" the harpy screeched.

"Then tell her to get out of my way!" the centaur shouted. "I'm just trying to find water."

The empousa stood, her fangs bared. "We're *all* trying to find water, pony boy! Push me again and see what happens."

"Everyone, calm down!" bellowed Asterion, wading into the conflict. "Please, I know it is frightening and confusing in here, but we are close to a solution. We cannot turn on one another now."

The crowd grumbled in response, but no one directly countered the bull-man.

He crossed over to Hazel and knelt in front of her. "How are you feeling, Praetor?"

"Tired," she said, rubbing one of her temples. "My head aches. I shouldn't complain, though. You're doing all the work."

Asterion made a rumbling sound deep in his chest. “I think you underestimate how hot and thin the air has become. I am impressed a mortal such as yourself is still conscious. One advantage we mythics have over humans—our bodies can withstand much more extreme conditions. Remember, we lived in Tartarus.” He offered his hand. “Can you walk? There is still some water left in the west fountain.”

Hazel placed her feet on solid ground. She stood, wobbling as the pain throbbed deeper in her head. She steadied herself on Asterion’s outstretched arm.

“Hmm.” Asterion sounded concerned. “Hazel, would you consent to me carrying you?”

She was too weak to do anything but nod.

He picked her up smoothly and cradled her in his arms. Hazel tried not to feel self-conscious about being carried like a baby. On the other hand, part of her felt safer than she had in days. As Asterion walked through the crowd of mythics, she noticed that everyone *always* moved out of his way without a word. A dryad with red leaves for hair nodded in deference. A satyr reached out and patted his arm.

“They respect you,” Hazel said softly. “I can see it.”

“I am doing my best,” he said. “Quinoa, Arielle, and I have been trying to greet all our new neighbors as they arrive.”

“Where are they right now? I haven’t seen Arielle for hours.”

Asterion stepped over the baby drakon, who had collapsed across the sidewalk after a hard day smelting ore. “Quinoa is counting, I imagine. Arielle is brokering a peace deal between the Laistrygonian giants and the Cyclopes. She is very good at diplomacy, talking others down from their heightened state of fear. You should see it.”

Hazel smiled. “And to think she was rejected by her kindred because she couldn’t charmspeak.”

“Indeed,” said the bull-man. “I believe that was her original dream: to learn how to persuade others without needing to charm them. She will make an excellent ambassador someday, assuming…”

Asterion’s voice trailed off, but Hazel knew what he was thinking. *Assuming we get out of here alive.*

She hoped Naomi Solace had made it safely to Camp Jupiter. Hazel hated having to depend on factors that were outside her control, but the idea that reinforcements might be on their way was the only thing keeping her from despair. That, and the presence of her mythic friends…

If they did get out of here, Hazel was going to fashion Asterion some diamond knitting needles. She'd make sure Quinoa got the best kindergarten kinder-garden in Roman history. And she'd appoint Arielle the legion's official ambassador to somewhere…. Tartarus? Camp Half-Blood? Indiana? She realized maybe the lack of oxygen was affecting her brain.

At the west end of the park, Asterion gently set Hazel down at the edge of the fountain. There were only a few inches of water left at the bottom, and it didn't look very clean, but Hazel was surprised there was any left at all. The reason for that was probably the enormous fire-breathing bronze bull standing guard.

"This is Maxwell," Asterion told her. "He has been helping me by making sure the remainder of the water is rationed appropriately. Maxwell, this is Hazel. She would like a drink, please."

The Colchis bull lowered his horns in acknowledgment. His ruby eyes were so large Hazel doubted even her powers could have summoned them from the earth.

She didn't love the idea of drinking bottom-of-the-fountain water, but she decided it was better than no water at all. Besides, she understood that Asterion and Maxwell were doing her a favor.

In the end, it sort of tasted like one of those weird smoothies all the yoga people got in Berkeley. She'd shared one once with Frank when they were out on a date, and neither of them had quite understood what the hype was about. The memory brought sadness with it. When she turned to look back at Asterion, his image was blurred by her tears.

She missed Frank. And Nico. And Will.

She missed her *home*.

Asterion read her expression. "Please do not lose hope, my friend," he said. "We will get out of here soon."

"Have the diggers found a way out yet?"

He didn't answer, which was all the answer she needed.

Her shadow-travel powers didn't work in this terrible cage. She could summon things from the earth, but that was of limited use. She had never felt so stuck in her life.

Hazel swayed in place, her heart beating rapidly in her ears. She didn't even realize Arielle and Quinoa had joined them until Quinoa fluttered up and looked her in the face.

"I said, are you okay, Hazel?" he asked. "You look sick."

"Manners, please," said Arielle. "You can't just tell people they look sick."

"It's okay," Hazel said. "I *feel* sick. I'm glad you guys are sturdier than me."

The karpos cracked his tiny knuckles. “I could take on Pirithous *and* Mary Tudor at once. And probably, like, twenty more people, if I’m being honest.”

“I feel so *useless*,” Hazel said. “Like I’m just waiting around to be rescued.”

“Useless?” Arielle scoffed. “Without you, we’d have no weapons or tools. And without that, do you know how quickly this place would have devolved into chaos?”

“You gave us *hope*, Hazel,” added Quinoa.

Hazel’s instinct was to dismiss that idea. Her friends were just trying to cheer her up. Then Asterion put his hand on her shoulder.

“There has been much talk among the mythics,” he said. “You know how suspicious the others were of you.”

“I don’t blame them,” Hazel said.

“But attitudes are changing,” Asterion continued. “We have told them how you welcomed us into Camp Jupiter, how you fought for us. The others here…they may not say anything to your face, but they have come to respect you, Hazel. They have never seen someone like you work so hard to help them. They are not going to forget that.”

Hazel shook her head. “But I didn’t do anything. I failed.”

“No.” Arielle knelt beside her. “Listen to me, Hazel. Asterion told me that you struggle with whether you are a good person or not, but you have such a pure, loving soul. You care so much about the world around you, and that is *rare*. It shouldn’t be, but it is. You are one of a kind, Hazel Levesque.”

“What she said,” added Quinoa. “Only, you know, I probably would’ve said it better.”

Arielle gently swatted the karpos’s wing. “The only problem you should worry about, Praetor, is that when we get out of here, you might have a few hundred more mythics asking for sanctuary.”

Hazel suddenly felt even dizzier. “A few…hundred?”

Asterion chuckled. “You should rest, Hazel. You will burn less oxygen that way, and we need to preserve your energy for whatever comes next.”

“Because we *are* getting free,” said Arielle. “Maybe we don’t know how at this exact moment, but the others haven’t given up yet.”

“I’ll keep watch,” said Quinoa. “No one will dare mess with you if I’m around!”

Hazel wrapped her friends in a group hug. She felt grateful and loved, even if her headache was so bad the sunlight was starting to hurt her eyes.

“Fine, I’ll nap,” she said. “But please wake me up if something happens.”

Asterion guided her to a nearby oak tree, where she curled up on the ground.

She still wished she were back in bed with her squishy pillow, but she found comfort in the sight of her friends offering their protection.

She closed her eyes.

Of course she had a demigod dream.

She found herself back beneath the earth of Resurrection Island. But this time, all around her, the mythics from Pirithous’s prison were digging furiously, using tools crafted from the jewels and metals she’d conjured. As they got deeper into the soil, smelly black oil seeped to the surface, but they didn’t stop, even as it pooled around their feet.

Hazel herself was trapped inside the spire of gemstones. She could only watch as the oil got deeper and the mythics kept digging. She wanted to tell them to stop. They didn’t need to work for Gaea anymore. They could make their own choices now. But she couldn’t move or speak.

She glanced down. An enormous pair of hands jutted from the ground and wrapped around her legs, holding her in place within the spire. She felt like she should know who those hands belonged to, but the name evaded her.

The mythics continued to dig. The cavern filled with oil. No one seemed aware of it except Hazel.

It was all her fault. Somehow, she knew this.

A tiny griffin—was that Orcus?—disappeared under the dark tide. A few bubbles rose to the surface. Then nothing.

As the oil rose, things got stranger. An empousa raised her emerald shovel. Suddenly, her arm fell off. A blemmyae swung his golden pickax and stabbed himself right between the chest-eyes.

Hazel watched in horror as this scene repeated across the cavern: every mythic using her conjured tools lost a limb or crippled themself in some bizarre accident.

Where had she seen this before?

Charlie Gasceaux. A name she hadn't thought of in decades…He had lost his arm because of a bracelet he'd purchased from Hazel's mother. Back then, all of Hazel's gems had been cursed. Anyone who used them or tried to sell them met a gruesome fate.

Now the curse was happening *again*.

She was powerless to stop it. The maimed army of mythics disappeared under the inky waves.

Just as the oil reached Hazel's chin…

Someone shook her awake. Fuzzy shapes loomed over her, haloed in sunlight.

"Hazel," said Arielle. "You need to see this."

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. The smell hit her first: musky and earthy, the odor of hundreds of creatures trapped together, breathing the same stale air for much too long. Hazel's shirt clung to her sweaty back.

Asterion stood next to her, with Quinoa perched on his shoulder. "I am sorry we had to wake you, but there has been a development. Pirithous has arrived…and he is not alone."

Hazel tried to stand and immediately regretted it. The whole world spun. She almost toppled over, but Arielle caught her arm.

"I've got you," said the empousa.

Asterion took her other arm and then bellowed deeply to the crowd, "Make way!"

And the crowd *parted*. It was so instantaneous that Hazel could hardly believe it. Mythics lined up to either side of them, letting her pass. Every eye was on her. It was an odd sensation, to be seen by so many at once, but she didn't feel the same hostility from them that she had earlier. She believed Asterion's words: the mythics were now seeing her in a different light. She would have been relieved, even elated, but she couldn't quite shake the memory of her dream—all these creatures drowning in oil, dying from her cursed gems and precious metals.

She passed the harpies she'd seen the day before. One of the injured ones bowed. "We will remember what you gave us."

Hazel smiled back weakly. Her throat was too dry to speak.

Just before they reached the edge of the barrier, Asterion stopped and pointed toward the de Young Museum. "There."

The sun was now arcing toward the west, casting a warm afternoon light over Golden Gate Park. On the road in front of the museum, where Hazel might have expected to see a school bus or a public shuttle, there stood an enormous two-wheeled wooden wagon, its top covered with a canvas tarp. Chained to the yoke, instead of horses or oxen, were two Cyclopes.

Pirithous himself was approaching the barrier, flanked by Mary Tudor, Tantalus, and the two red-robed skeletal guards from the courtroom, still holding their double-pronged spears. The judges' black gowns flowed around them. Their gold masks glinted on ropes around their necks. Mary Tudor and Tantalus looked almost bored, annoyed even, but Pirithous was beaming with excitement.

A few mortals passed by, enjoying their afternoon in the park, but none of them acknowledged the strange procession. Hazel concluded that the Mist must still be working, but that didn't reassure her. She didn't like the expression on Pirithous's face.

While the judges were still out of earshot, she turned to Asterion. "Any idea what this means?"

"No," admitted the bull-man. "But I do have some good news. It appears there *is* a limit to the dodecahedron's reach underground. The diggers are close. I have asked them to keep working while we deal with…whatever our jailers want."

Hazel allowed herself a moment of relief. "Thank the gods. Because I'll be honest with you—I'm not feeling very well right now."

"Neither am I," Quinoa muttered. "Even we karpoi require oxygen, and it stinks like Orcus's farts in here." He hesitated. "I miss that gassy griffin."

Hazel scanned the perimeter of their prison. Her heart sank as she noticed more of Pirithous's allies approaching from all directions. To her right, their old enemy Laverna, her head reattached, was riding what looked like a manticore. To their left, the three gray-robed di inferi were directing a mob of shambling undead, trying to get them to form a line.

"Why are they trying to surround us?" Hazel wondered.

Asterion frowned. He gestured to Rhodope, the orange-feathered leader of the harpies, who immediately flew to his side.

“My friend,” he said, “please check the perimeter. Hazel has noted that Pirithous’s forces seem to be encircling us.”

With a bitter squawk, Rhodope flew off.

Hazel’s hand tightened on her spatha, though she doubted she had the strength for a sword fight. “What are they up to? They can’t seriously think Pluto is going to show up.”

“And yet he appears to believe so,” grumbled Arielle. “And I think that’s all that matters—he believes what he says.”

“There are many of us,” Asterion said, loud enough for the nearby mythics to hear him. “If Pirithous wants a fight, he will get one.”

The mythics muttered in agreement, closing ranks around them. Hazel wanted to feel the same hopefulness and determination, but she mostly just felt pain. Her lungs burned, begging her for more oxygen.

Finally Pirithous’s entourage reached the barrier. Their captor strode forward, a smug look on his face.

“It is time, Hazel Levesque! You can tell your fellow prisoners to stop digging. That is pointless now.”

Dread bloomed in Hazel’s chest. Apparently, Pirithous had been keeping tabs on their activities.

“If you think we’re giving up,” she growled, “that’s never happening. We *will* break out of here.”

Pirithous laughed like this was an excellent joke.

“You misunderstand me, dear girl,” he said. “You can stop digging because you don’t *need* to find a way out. I’m setting you all free.”

CHAPTER 32

Nico had seen a lot of strange things in his life, but a minivan full of demigods and mythics wearing Cocoa Puffs as chest accessories was certainly at the top of his list.

Despite their day of training, each member of the team was struggling in their own way with their ride-along emotion. Savannah's eyes were bloodshot from crying with Grief. Deion kept kicking the floorboards in frustration as Anger grinned toothily in his pouch. Even Orcus squirmed as Jealousy poked its tusks into his back.

Semele was the only one without a cacodemon, so it was hard to tell how she was feeling. However, Nico was just glad she was a wisp of smoke. There wouldn't have been a seat for her in the crowded Chevy otherwise.

Meanwhile, Naomi hummed cheerfully as she drove them over the Bay Bridge. Nico imagined she was coming up with lyrics for a new hit song, "Vanload of Emotions."

Orcus whimpered. "I don't like this feeling. Can I have someone else's feeling?"

"That's just Jealousy making you feel jealous," Nico said. "It'll be worth it, I promise."

He opened his bomber jacket to check on Defiance, who puffed up and glared at him like, *Yeah, I'm still here. What are you gonna do about it?*

"Wow," said Yazan. "Your Puff has so much personality. I'm kind of ashamed of mine."

"That's because you're holding Shame," Will pointed out.

From Yazan's pouch, Shame hissed in reprimand.

Meanwhile, in the backseat, Lavinia wept as she held Sadness. Lucius Silver apologized profusely, since he was holding Guilt. And Frank just stared out the window, sighing. "I miss Hazel," he said as he cradled Longing.

"There is a great deal of drama in this van," Semele observed. "I don't know how you get used to these Cocoa Puffs of yours."

"They're my babies!" Nico said. "Everyone will adjust—you'll see."

Naomi put a hand over her mouth. "Will and Nico have a family of tiny babies. Oh, it's *so* adorable I can't stand it!"

“Thanks, Mom,” Will muttered, though he didn’t really sound upset.

In Will’s pouch, Loneliness let out a plaintive sigh, as if he didn’t see how anyone could expect him to do his job of making Will lonely when there were so many other people in the van.

In the shotgun seat, Johan turned toward Will. “By the way, I brought a thermos of tea and some extra snacks. The wind spirits in the mess hall packed some delicious baked goods. Though I have to say, those spirits were terrifying….”

Nico didn’t understand the comment until he remembered that Johan’s Puff was Fear. He frowned. “You know, Johan, maybe I didn’t give you the best Puff for going into a battle. If you want to stay back, there’s no shame.”

Shame hissed, making it clear there was actually a *lot* of shame, in its humble opinion.

“I—I appreciate that,” Johan said. “I am not usually one for fighting, but I want to be there for our friends. Perhaps it will not be so scary. Perhaps our enemies will be cute and cuddly.”

“Hmph,” said Orcus. “I’m jealous of your optimism.”

Jealousy whined and shook its tusks.

The ride went on like that for another half hour, and Nico eventually leaned back and stared up at the van’s ceiling. He would’ve probably gotten nervous about their chances for survival, given everyone’s literal emotional baggage, but he had wisely chosen Defiance as his companion. He refused to give in to his doubts. He would make *sure* he and his friends prevailed.

He was so lost in his defiant thoughts that he didn’t realize where they were until Naomi cleared her throat. “Well, gang,” she said, “we’re here.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Will.

Nico looked out the window. After hearing Naomi describe what she’d seen in the park in great detail, he thought he was prepared. He was not. Before them stretched the densest concentration of mythic beings he’d ever seen in his life, including during the Battle of Manhattan and in the depths of Tartarus. Between the de Young Museum and the California Academy of Sciences, a massive tree-lined plaza was filled with Cyclopes, empousai, telkhines, harpies, giants, and even…was that a *drakon*? More mythics formed a circle around the perimeter as if to keep the crowd contained. The whole scene looked like Monsterpalooza, except no one was having fun. Most of the crowd had pushed up against the de Young side of the plaza, where some sort of standoff seemed to be happening.

For safety’s sake, Naomi had parked the van about a hundred meters from the de Young. That meant Nico couldn’t see everything clearly, but he was pretty sure he could make out three

figures in black robes standing at the edge of the park's steps, flanked by much taller red-robed humanoids holding spears. The Court of the Dead had arrived. He couldn't see the invisible barrier, obviously, but the judges seemed to be talking to a group on the other side. That large horned creature must be Asterion. Nico couldn't distinguish Hazel in the mob, but he hoped she was nearby.

Naomi whistled softly. "There's a *lot* more of them now. I can't lie—this is way more interesting than if I'd stayed at my hotel. Are you sure I shouldn't stick around?"

"Please, no," said Will. Then he frowned. "Not that I don't love seeing you, but I want you to stay safe. I hope you're not mad at me."

"Never, dear!" his mom said. "I get it."

Will's shoulders relaxed a little. "I just never expected my world and your world to collide a second time. Not after that day in Washington Square Park…I didn't want you to go through anything like that again."

She reached back and patted his knee. "I'm glad we did collide, my love."

Will blushed once more, and Nico decided he would never get enough of it.

"However," she added, "I don't want to revisit the Washington Square incident, either. Though I do love visiting New York City! Do you remember what we found in that empty subway car?"

Nico groaned. "Oh my gods, Will. You absolutely take after your mother!"

Will laughed. "I've told that story already, Mom."

"Well, in any case…I'm glad I could help even a little bit. It's been a delight getting to spend time with all of you! Be safe out there, okay? If that's possible, given…" She looked out the front windshield and frowned. "Oh, wow. That's new. Are you all seeing this?"

Nico followed her gaze.

At first, he thought a fog bank was moving in. White wisps of vapor had started to drift across the plaza, brushing against the magical barrier and parting like waves against the prow of a ship. But this stuff wasn't fog. It moved in multiple directions at once. It shimmered as it swirled, coiling around the monsters guarding the plaza. Some of the white tendrils snaked across the barrier, branching and zigzagging as if following a path of unseen cracks. Nico thought the stuff almost looked angry. It seemed to be exploring this massive crowd of mythics, the barrier, the whole scene, and it didn't like what it saw.

"It's the Mist," Semele said.

Naomi tugged nervously on her earring. “Is it supposed to be acting so…active?”

“Definitely not,” said Johan. “We shouldn’t even be able to see it. I’m afraid—”

“Pirithous’s plan is starting to work,” Nico realized. “The Mist is breaking.”

Frank shouldered his quiver. “Hazel needs our help. Let’s go!”

They piled out of the van. Naomi came around from the driver’s side and wrapped Will in a hug. “Take care of yourself, and each other.”

Will nodded. “I’ll make sure to touch base once we’re safe, okay?”

“I trust you, Will,” she said. “You’ve kept yourself alive and thriving all this time. I’m proud of you.”

Then she turned to Nico. “You get one of these, too.”

As Naomi Solace embraced him, Nico was a jumble of emotions. On the one hand, his anxiety waned. He felt protected and grateful. On the other hand, Nico felt a spike of jealousy and sadness, even though he wasn’t holding those Puffs. He wished his own mother were here, comforting him before a big mission and/or battle.

But she was not.

He reminded himself that his mother’s spirit was at peace. Like Bianca, she had moved beyond the world of mortals. They were both okay. And they were proud of him too.

He did his best to embrace that knowledge and enjoy this moment for what it was: his boyfriend’s mother showing him love.

“Thank you,” Nico told her.

Then, before he could start crying, he faced the rest of his group. It was time to step up. Time to lead, like Mr. D had been telling him.

“All right, team,” he said.

“We’re ready,” said Will, and he grabbed an arrow from his quiver.

Nico smiled at him. “Let’s go help our friends.”

CHAPTER 33

Hazel glared at Pirithous. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “There’s no reason you’d just set us all free.”

Unfortunately, upon hearing the word *free*, the imprisoned mythics became agitated. A terrible surge slammed her up against the barrier, knocking the breath out of her lungs.

“Let us out!” someone cried.

“He’s freeing us!” shouted another, which only made the crush of bodies worse.

“Back up!” Asterion bellowed. “All of you, BACK UP!”

He planted his feet firmly, pushing against the crowd, which gave Hazel a pocket of space. She gasped for air. Slowly, thanks to the iron will of Asterion, the crowd of captives began to shuffle backward. Otherwise, Hazel would’ve ended up flattened against the force field and looking like a demigod drape.

Pirithous watched with obvious pleasure.

“Degenerates.” He chuckled. “I’ll admit, part of me wants to leave all you in there. I do love watching you suffer.”

“*You’re* the degenerate!” said Arielle, doing her best to cradle Quinoa and protect him from the crowd.

“You don’t get to be the judge of that,” Pirithous said. “Unlike me, you have neither the experience *nor* the moral fortitude.”

Then he raised his voice so more of the crowd could hear. “You have brought this on yourselves, convicts! You have been properly judged and sentenced to death. But I am here to offer you a deal for a pardon! It is not *you* I want, but the architect of this chaos, this complete deterioration of the natural order! Turn witnesses for the prosecution and join me. You could yet be free!”

Hazel’s rage felt like dry ice—so cold it burned in her lungs. “You’re talking about Pluto,” she said. “You expect to put my *father* on trial? He would *never* show his face for you. Not in a million years! And we won’t help you!”

Pirithous sneered, making his evil little beard twitch to one side. “I’m not sure your cellmates agree with you, Hazel Levesque.”

Hazel scanned the crowd behind her. Mythics were muttering to one another, passing word to those in back who hadn’t caught Pirithous’s speech. Hazel wasn’t an expert at reading mythics’ expressions, but she could see the desperation in their eyes. They were hungry, thirsty, and slowly suffocating. And as much as they hated Pirithous, they were starting to waver. He was offering them a lifeline. It made Hazel remember something Percy Jackson had once told her—that you should be careful approaching a drowning swimmer, because they will grab at anything. They aren’t thinking rationally. They will drag you down with them.

“You can’t trust him!” she shouted to the crowd. “He’s put us in here to *die*!”

“Oh, but look around me!” Pirithous countered. “Look at all those who have joined my cause. Spirits of the dead, monsters just like yourselves, even gods. They all see the wisdom of what I do. Hades—or Pluto, if you prefer—is the real villain here. He has allowed this chaos to happen. We need to return to a world of *order*!”

The crowd began to press forward again, clamoring to get out.

“CALM YOURSELVES!” Asterion bellowed. He pressed his hands against the barrier, shielding Hazel with his body. “Pirithous, you cannot stand in judgment against the gods. You have lost your senses.”

“And you are the disgraced former Minotaur!” Pirithous said. “You disrespect your former glory! I *have* stood in judgment against gods. Behold the ones who are now my allies. They understand the deal I offer. All of you can accept it too! Or you can die. Either way, you serve my purpose. Look around you! The Mist has reached its breaking point. When it does, Hades will have no choice but to appear. Maybe the gods ignore you, but they won’t ignore *me*!”

Hazel looked above her. She wasn’t sure if it was just her oxygen-deprived brain, but white fault lines seemed to be forming across the barrier. The air outside swirled with coils of shimmering vapor. She’d thought she was beginning to understand the Mist, but this was new. Her ears popped. She brought her hand to her upper lip and realized her nose was bleeding. Pirithous was right. The Mist was pressing down on the entire plaza, building the magical energy to unsustainable levels.

Asterion growled. “I will never help your sham of a court, Pirithous. I did nothing wrong. I merely embraced change. All of us here did. We will not go back!”

Hazel was starting to feel dizzy, but she filled her lungs and shouted to those outside the barrier, “All of you on Pirithous’s side, you don’t have to do this! You don’t have to fear him!”

Pirithous laughed. “But they agree with me, Hazel! By all means, if any of my followers would like to join our prisoners in their cage, you may do so.” He glanced around him expectantly. “Anyone? No?”

One of his Cyclops guards snorted. “We are monsters. We have one purpose in this life. There is no reason to choose anything else!”

The rest of Pirithous’s forces roared in approval.

“But are you not *tired*?” Asterion bellowed. “Are you not sick of the cycle—death, rebirth in Tartarus, death again? We just want to choose differently and be left *alone*. This is not a crime!”

“What *losers* you are,” said a new voice. An empousa stepped forward from Pirithous’s lines. As if things weren’t weird enough already, she wore a black-and-red cheerleader’s outfit with TEAM PIRITHOUS stitched across the chest and matching pom-poms clipped to her skirt. Her fiery hair blazed a dark shade of crimson. She locked her eyes onto Arielle. “You’re only here because you’re *broken*.”

“Kelli,” Arielle snarled. “I should have known.”

“Hey, sis.” Kelli smiled, showing her fangs. “How’s it going with your misfit band of rejects and defunct monsters?”

“Watch your tongue,” warned Asterion.

“Or what, bull-boy?” Kelli shot back. “You’re gonna knit me a sweater to death?”

Asterion snorted and raked the ground with one of his hooves.

Arielle put her hand on his arm. “Don’t let this suck-up rile you. She’s not worth it.”

Kelli laughed. “You don’t get it, do you? We *want* to be monsters. We enjoy terrifying the world.”

“How boring!” said Quinoa. “You are just tools Pirithous is using until he has no purpose for you. Then he’ll throw you away, like Gaea did with the karpoi! That’s what the powerful always do!”

“Oh, honey,” Kelli said. “You’re lucky Pirithous is offering you one last chance to join us. I wouldn’t be so kind. I’d eat you up with a side of steamed broccoli!”

“Enough,” Pirithous said, scanning the Mist, which was swirling ever faster around the plaza, bursting against the force field with a muffled crackling sound like snow thunder. “We are out of time.”

Then Pirithous shouted for the benefit of the imprisoned crowd. “Final offer—join us or die! Testify against the god of the Underworld, and you will be pardoned. Once the Mist breaks, it will be too late. You will be slaughtered as enemies, and you will never regenerate again!”

Pirithous’s circle of monsters moved in, closing ranks all around the plaza. They looked hungry, eager for blood. They weren’t as numerous as the prisoners, but Hazel suspected that wouldn’t matter—not after the mythics inside had been so weakened from days of starvation and thirst.

Hazel’s head throbbed. The pain spread behind her eyes. Blood trickled from her nostrils.

She felt like she was missing something important. If she could only think…

Her eyes came to rest on the covered wagon in front of the museum. She noticed how the minor gods had positioned themselves as far away from the wagon as possible—Laverna on the right-hand side of the plaza, the three di inferi on the left. Even the monsters on Pirithous’s side seemed to avoid looking at that wagon. She thought about the pitch Pirithous had made to the prisoners: *It is not* you *I want. Turn witnesses for the prosecution*…

“You’ve been trading up,” she realized, fixing Pirithous with a disgusted stare. “All these mythics, all these gods who are supposedly on your side…you trapped them, just like you’ve done to us. You released them on the condition that they help you catch even bigger prey. You’ve been working your way up to Hades—using the so-called ‘secret weapon’ you’ve got in that wagon. Whatever it is, you can’t really believe it will be powerful enough to imprison Hades himself.”

On either side of Pirithous, Mary Tudor and Tantalus suddenly looked nervous.

“Pirithous,” said Mary, “tell me she is wrong. I’m tired of life here on the surface.”

“This had better work,” Tantalus agreed. “You promised we would be lords of Erebos. I *never* want to come back to this world again.”

“Have a little faith, friends,” said Pirithous, his voice tinged with warning.

Hazel turned to Asterion. “As soon as we’re through the barrier, we have to destroy whatever is in that cart. That’s the source of Pirithous’s power.”

Asterion nodded grimly. “I will be happy to. Preferably over Pirithous’s dead body.”

Pirithous stepped back. For the first time, he looked shaken. “You have no idea who you are dealing with. I offered you a second chance. You chose death.”

He raised a hand and called out to his followers, “When the barrier falls, kill them all!”

There was another surge from behind Hazel as the captives shouted and screamed and jostled one another.

Hazel’s throat was so dry she couldn’t even sob. She despised what Pirithous was doing and how he viewed the world. No one here deserved to be imprisoned simply for choosing how they wanted to live.

“Courage!” Asterion shouted to his fellow mythics. “Do not despair!”

And then the whole world shattered.

CHAPTER 34

Hazel felt like she was in a horror movie because of all the screaming around her.

When the Mist broke, an entire school group was exiting the de Young. Once the kids saw two Cyclopes yoked to a wagon, they scattered in all directions with their teachers chasing after. A mom pushing a stroller was politely navigating through a crowd of tourists when she realized the tourists were actually bloodsucking vampires with donkey legs and flaming hair. She shrieked and pushed her stroller from zero to sixty as she fled down the sidewalk. A taxi swerved off the road to avoid a giant scorpion, went airborne, and landed in the plaza wedged between two cypress trees.

Every mortal in sight was behaving similarly. Hazel couldn't blame them.

The moment the world shattered, a compression wave exploded outward from a point just between Hazel and Pirithous. Zigzagging lines of white smoke like horizontal lightning split Golden Gate Park—breaking trees, buildings, cars, streets, and even the sky into a million jagged puzzle pieces.

It was as if Hazel had been looking through a lens her entire life. She simply hadn't realized it until the glass fractured and fell from her eyes. When the white lightning faded and the dust settled, everything looked normal again—except sharper, rawer, and somehow uglier. She'd never realized that Laistrygonian giants had so many warts, or that Cyclopes suffered from pink eye, or that Pirithous's hair was actually a toupee.

What she *did* realize was that the Mist was gone. The curtain separating mortal and godly realities had been ripped away—at least in this one area of San Francisco. For the first time, perhaps ever, regular mortals were seeing exactly what demigods saw: a world full of monsters and magic. Some of the less rattled mortals were filming the scene on their phones as they backed away from the plaza, and Hazel suspected that those images would appear online with no filter.

The implications were…not great.

Hazel could think of only a couple of upsides to this situation. First, the invisible prison barrier had broken along with the Mist. She knew this because she could breathe again—cold, fresh air, rich with oxygen, without the stench of stale mythic breath and body odor. Second, the

hundreds of monsters on both sides of the barrier were momentarily just as stunned as the mortals. No one was attacking anyone. At least not yet.

Her relief was short-lived, though. She was about to yell for Asterion to charge the wagon when a different sort of magical storm formed in front of her.

The ground shook from a peal of thunder so loud that even the largest monsters cowered. A black funnel cloud spiraled downward, seething like boiling water in a pot.

“Yes, yes!” cried Pirithous. “Come forth, Pluto! Come see what I have wrought!”

He snapped his fingers impatiently at his nearest minions. “What are you waiting for? Uncover the tarp!”

Kelli stared at him in disbelief, as if thinking *Who, me?* Then she grabbed a couple of Laistrygonian giants and led them toward the wagon.

Hazel regained her senses enough to draw her sword. “Asterion!”

Before she could order her troops into battle, another crack of thunder almost knocked her off her feet. The tip of the funnel cloud now hovered only a hundred feet above her. Every cell in her body was charged with panic. A shape descended from the base of the tornado—a smoky human form floating toward them. It was definitely *not* Pluto.

“Hurry!” Pirithous snapped at his minions.

He was the only one in the park who looked excited. Hundreds of mythics milled restlessly, backing away from the incoming…whatever it was. Even the minor gods looked nervous.

The smoky form split, becoming two human shapes rather than one. Side by side, they descended from the sky, until they floated just above the ground between Hazel and Pirithous.

Their forms solidified into flesh. They looked so much alike they might have been identical twins. The one on the right was dressed in a white tunic; the one on the left wore a flowing red palla. Both had smooth bronze skin, shoulder-length dark hair, and the most beautiful faces Hazel had ever seen (which was saying something, since Hazel had seen Venus herself). But the strangest thing about the pair was that they had no feet. They hovered just over the pavement, their legs simply ending below the ankles.

The park had fallen silent. Even the nearest mortals had stopped screaming, though a few were still filming this newest development. Everyone watched the beautiful twins—who had to be gods, Hazel thought—towering over Pirithous.

Mary Tudor and Tantalus cautiously stepped back, leaving the chief judge on his own. As Pirithous realized that he had not, in fact, summoned Pluto, a mix of emotions rippled across his face—surprise, disappointment, confusion, fear. But he managed to hide them behind a smile.

“Welcome!” he said. “Thank you for answering my call!”

The two gods interlocked their hands. They were positively beaming, their faces radiant with joyous light, but Hazel sensed something odd about them. These gods wore their smiles the same way Pirithous wore his golden mask—more to hide behind than to express real feeling.

“So,” said the god in the tunic, “you meant to summon us?”

“It has been very long indeed since someone did that,” said their twin, looking upon the gathered crowd with an inscrutable smile. “And you broke the Mist to do it?”

Their voices were as beautiful as their faces—soft and melodic, without a hint of displeasure—but Hazel’s every instinct screamed *DANGER!* The rest of the crowd seemed to feel the same way. The mythics, who had been so eager to escape or to fight only moments ago, stood motionless, as tense as grenade pins.

“I— Yes, of course!” said Pirithous, doing his best to regain his composure. “It was I who orchestrated all of this!” He swept his hand across the plaza, indicating what had to be the weirdest crowd ever assembled. “I am Pirithous, chief justice of the Court of the Dead. And I have summoned you here to join our cause!”

The gods kept floating and smiling. Over at the wagon, Kelli and her Laistrygonian giants were trying to remove the tarp, all sly-like, but it wasn’t really something they could do subtly.

Hazel was tempted to warn the twin gods that something was up. A trap was about to be sprung. But her gut still told her to stay as still as possible. Also, she wanted to see what would happen. Part of her wondered if these gods might blast Pirithous into a pile of cinders and save them all a lot of trouble.

“I see,” said the twin in the red palla. “And what is your cause? My brother here…well, he and I are *very* interested in what you have to say!”

Pirithous spread his arms magnanimously. “We seek to restore order to the world! Monsters should be monsters! Gods should be honored! Many minor gods who have been forgotten now follow me. If you join us—”

“Minor gods…” said the twin who had been referred to as the brother. His voice was still pleasant—the way a poisonous flower might be pleasant. “Forgotten…”

Panic briefly crossed Pirithous’s face. “I don’t mean…Obviously you aren’t—”

“Then you know who we are,” said the other twin. “Since you summoned us in such a dramatic way.”

“Y-yes, of course I know!” said Pirithous, glancing back at Kelli as if to say *Hurry up with that secret weapon!* “Although this poor, ignorant one”—he gestured to Hazel, which she found quite rude—“does not know of your glory. Perhaps you would introduce yourselves for her sake?”

The twins turned to study Hazel. Only Asterion’s comforting presence behind her kept her from backing away.

“Poor, ignorant mortal,” said the brother. “I am Veritas, the god of truth. My sister is—”

“His counterpart, Aletheia,” she said. “Goddess of honesty.”

Pirithous looked delighted. “You see, Hazel Levesque? You see the quality of gods I have summoned?”

From across the plaza, Hazel heard a sound she hadn’t expected: a derisive snort. She glanced to her right and saw her old enemy Laverna, goddess of thieves, covering her mouth and trying very hard not to look at the newcomers.

Hazel frowned. She returned her focus to the twins and went with her gut.

“You’re lying,” she said. “You’re no gods of truth.”

For a heartbeat, the twins maintained their calm angelic demeanor. Their eyes gleamed. Hazel waited for them to blast her into the next dimension.

Then the brother grinned at his sister.

The sister laughed like she’d just heard a dirty joke. “Oh my gods. Their faces! At least *this* girl isn’t a complete fool.”

Pirithous blanched. “I don’t— Wait. What?”

“Ask your friend Laverna,” Hazel said. “She knows these two.”

“Laverna is here?” The brother cackled, his voice now more malicious than melodic. “Where are you, girl? Get over here!”

Laverna trudged over, her expression sour. With her sack over her shoulder and leaning on a new iron pole, she looked like Santa’s evil sister after a hard night’s work abducting naughty children.

Meanwhile, Kelli and her giants had finally succeeded in uncovering the wagon. When Pirithous saw this, he seemed to relax, his face regaining some of its old smugness.

“Laverna,” he said, “by the oath that binds you, I command you to tell me who these two…guests are.”

Hazel got the feeling he wanted to use a less polite word than *guests*. She didn’t know what oath Pirithous was talking about, but his command seemed to cause the goddess physical pain.

“The sister is Apate,” she said. “Spirit of deception. The brother is her counterpart: Dolus, god of trickery and guile.”

Apate leered at her. “Awww, and we were having such fun! You used to be a better sport, Laverna. What are you doing working with this puffed-up pretender, anyway?”

Pirithous’s face was a mottled red. “You *lied* about being gods of truth?”

Dolus grinned. “That’s kind of what we do.”

“They look exactly like Truth and Honesty,” Laverna muttered. “The only way you can tell the difference”—she gestured at their spindly floating legs—“is that this pair can’t stand on their own two feet.”

“We save a *ton* on shoes, though,” Apate said, winking at Pirithous. “Now, Mister Chief Justice Person, perhaps you could explain why you threw this little party, because it sure wasn’t to wake us up from our long slumber. We *like* the Mist. It tricks people. We tend to notice when someone *breaks* it.”

Mary Tudor and Tantalus were now trying to hide behind each other, like they were playing some weird game of tag. Kelli stood by her cart, apparently waiting for a command. The rest of the crowd remained motionless, entranced by the two beautiful liars who appeared on the verge of doing something violent and possibly entertaining.

“It’s a trap,” Hazel blurted out. “You should leave right now.”

The twins regarded her.

“But we *like* traps,” said Dolus.

“Adore them,” Apate agreed. “Especially since they don’t work on us. But I tell you what, child, since you seem to be the only one here with a functioning brain: once Pirithous answers our questions and fails to trap us, I’ll let you decide how we cook him—Cajun spice or extra crispy, hmm?”

“Yum!” said Dolus. “Now hush and let the adults talk.”

They returned their attention to Pirithous, who seemed to be having trouble swallowing.

“I—I was not lying,” Pirithous stammered. “My plan is exactly what I said.”

“It was all Pirithous’s idea!” Queen Mary shrieked.

“He forced us!” Tantalus added.

Apate smiled amiably at the two judges. “Well, good. Then we don’t need you.” She snapped her fingers, and Mary and Tantalus turned to dust.

Maybe this should have pleased Hazel, but all the hair rose on her arms. She reached for Asterion’s hand. She could hear the rustle of Quinoa’s leafy wings as he trembled in Arielle’s arms.

Hazel wondered if she and her friends could find a way to leave now, and let Pirithous face the ramifications of his actions alone. But she didn’t want to draw any attention. Also, she couldn’t abandon the other imprisoned mythics, or put mortals in even worse danger. She had a feeling these twins were not particular about who they turned extra crispy.

“Whoops!” Apate regarded the piles of judge dust she’d made and giggled like a child at a birthday party. “Laverna, my old friend, perhaps you could tell us the nature of Pirithous’s trap, and why you are serving such an inferior being.”

“Laverna,” Pirithous countered, “you will say nothing.”

The goddess of thieves looked so torn Hazel thought her head might come off again. Laverna opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“Well then,” Dolus sighed. “I guess we don’t need you, either.”

He snapped his fingers, and the goddess exploded into a cloud of lint.

Pirithous’s eyes widened. “You *dare* disintegrate *my* goddess?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Apate. “We can’t disintegrate goddesses. We just sent her to Mongolia. Or possibly Tanzania. Not really sure. She’ll find her way back eventually.”

“Now, then!” Dolus raised his voice so it echoed throughout the park. “Before I have to vaporize anyone else, what were you really trying to do here, Pirithous?”

The last remaining judge tried to stand straighter, to give the appearance that he knew what he was doing, but Hazel wasn’t fooled. He looked *terrified*.

“I—I was hoping for Hades,” he said in a high-pitched voice.

Dolus’s smile filled Hazel with dread. “So, you did *not* intend for us to arrive?”

“No,” Pirithous said. “That is the truth. But that doesn’t mean we can’t work together! I’m sure there is something I can do to provide both of you with what you want!”

“Oh, you can!” Apate glanced over her shoulder at Hazel. “What do you think, girl, Cajun spice, perhaps?”

The goddess lifted her arm and extended it toward Pirithous.

He backed away, his panicked eyes darting from side to side. “Kelli, now!”

The empousa cheerleader yelled, “RELEASE!”

The Laistrygonian giants and Cyclopes tipped over the entire wagon, spilling its contents across the steps of the museum. It sounded like a car being crushed in a trash compactor.

Pirithous’s secret weapon was an enormous chain. Each link was made of black Stygian iron and large enough that Hazel could’ve stepped through it easily. At either end was a stirrup-shaped shackle about four feet wide. Just looking at them made Hazel nauseated. As a child, she’d seen similar instruments of enslavement in museums in New Orleans. This chain was bigger and probably magic. But its purpose was the same.

Apate and Dolus had a different reaction. The two gods fell into each other’s arms, laughing so hard that tears rolled down their faces.

“He thinks…He thinks he can…” Dolus wheezed. “BWAHAHAHAHA!”

“With a *chain*!” Apate howled in delight. “What a fool!”

Pirithous did not look offended or frightened. His expression hardened.

He seemed…*certain*.

“Laugh while you can,” Pirithous said, raising his hand. “I, too, know how to snap my fingers.”

Apate managed to catch her breath. “Yes, show us your mighty power, Pirithous!”

Dolus spread his arms as if greeting the chain like a friend. “Come forth!” he begged. “Amaze me!”

Pirithous snapped his fingers. “Dolus and Apate, I bind you.”

Nothing happened. The twin gods collapsed in another peal of laughter.

Then the chain lashed out like a rattlesnake. One shackle struck Apate in the neck, contracting until it had her in a choke hold. The other shackle did the same to Dolus. The gods crashed to the pavement so violently that Hazel winced. Dolus’s face smacked against the asphalt.

The twins tried to rise, but they couldn't. The chain pulled them down, forcing their heads to the ground.

Dolus gasped. "What—what is this?"

Pirithous approached, once again in full command of the situation.

"I thought you knew everything about traps," he said. "Or did I actually succeed in deceiving the gods of deception?"

Apate snarled, trying in vain to raise her head. "How?" she croaked. "How is it so *heavy*?"

"Well," Pirithous said with a smirk, "the chain was meant for a Titan, after all.
Someone *far* more powerful than you."

He knelt at Apate's side, cupping her chin in his hand as if he were going to inspect her teeth. Hazel wanted to run him through with her sword, but she was too horrified to move.

"You see," Pirithous said, "when Hades released me from my punishment, he thought I would quietly fade away, becoming one of those impotent shades who drift around Asphodel. But I did not. I wandered the darkest corners of Erebos, consumed with righteous fury. I knew I had been given a sacred mission—to bring order to the Underworld by replacing that lazy, incompetent, corrupt, unfair…" He shuddered, struggling to bring his anger under control. "By replacing Hades."

He stood, smiling directly at Hazel. "Oh, I had no problem finding followers who agreed with me! But I needed more than bodies. I needed something that could trap a god. It took me ages, but I found it—a chain forged by Hephaestus himself, infused with the power of Zeus and the entire Council of Olympus. And then, like so many things made by the gods—it had simply been forgotten, abandoned, tossed aside. Much like me and all my followers!" He faced Dolus and Apate. "You should feel honored, my newest recruits. You have been bound"—he paused dramatically—"by the chains of *Prometheus*!"

A terrible wail rose from Apate, forcing Hazel to clamp her hands over her ears.

"Free us!" cried the goddess.

"You will regret this!" howled Dolus.

Hazel shivered. She had told Pirithous much the same thing in the Court of the Dead. And yet, despite the terrible power of these gods, here was Pirithous with the upper hand *again*.

The spectacle still held everyone spellbound. Mortal bystanders, having recovered from their initial shock, were starting to gather around the plaza. Half a dozen cars had stopped in the street, both drivers and passengers hanging out their windows, aiming their phones at the

crowd of monsters. In the distance, Hazel heard the *thump, thump, thump* of an approaching helicopter. A news crew? The police? Either way, it was the last thing they needed.

Asterion squeezed her hand. “What should we do?”

Hazel wished she had an answer.

Next to her, Arielle cradled Quinoa more closely. “I don’t think we can fix this,” she murmured. “We need to cut our losses and get away from here. If we all run at once, he can’t stop us all.”

“Maybe she’s right,” Quinoa said. “I don’t want to become food for anyone!”

They had a point, but it still didn’t feel right to Hazel. She couldn’t simply leave all this behind, could she? She hadn’t solved anything. She couldn’t let Pirithous win. Demigods weren’t supposed to flee; they were supposed to stand and fight!

Meanwhile, Pirithous was glorying in his newest triumph. He strutted around the chained gods, his arms raised.

“Look what I have done, Hades!” he shouted to the skies. “This will be your fate, too!”

Asterion knelt next to Hazel. “It must be your decision, Praetor. I can see you struggling with this, but we will follow your lead.”

Hazel gripped her spatha. Maybe helping the others flee really was the best option—to save as many lives as they could—but it didn’t sit well with her. She needed to understand these chains. She needed to take their power away from Pirithous.

“Hades!” Pirithous called out again. “I am giving you the opportunity to defend yourself! Present yourself for my judgment!”

He is delusional, Hazel thought. *Father will never show up for him.*

Pirithous dropped his arms, and then he turned to address his followers. “No matter! We will continue our efforts until the accused *does* show his face. With our two new recruits, we will be stronger than ever!”

Dolus howled in anger. “We are *not* your recruits!”

“We will never work for you, fool!” Apate agreed.

“That is your choice, of course,” said Pirithous. “You can stay shackled in the chains of Prometheus for as long as you wish. The iron does have a way of convincing its victims, though. When I first summoned Laverna and put her in those chains, she lasted almost half a day before the eagle found her.”

The twins stopped struggling.

“Eagle?” said Dolus.

“Oh, yes!” Pirithous said. “A clever bird. It knows exactly how to cut open the belly of a god and feed on their immortal organs. *Very* painful, I understand. And it will just keep feeding…forever, as long as you are chained. But you don’t have to worry about that just yet. Your first problem will be the agony that comes from simply wearing those shackles. That should start right about…now.”

The twins writhed, screaming, as their restraints began to glow and steam.

Hazel couldn’t stand it. She had no love for these gods of deceit, but there was nothing fake about their cries of pain. She wasn’t sure she could do much, but she readied her spatha.

As quickly as it started, the gods’ agony subsided. They collapsed, gasping and exhausted, smoke still billowing from the irons around their necks.

“There, now,” Pirithous said. “You probably have…oh, a couple of minutes to relax. Of course, every time is exponentially more painful. I have to give Zeus credit. When he designs an eternal punishment, he doesn’t mess around.”

“We will destroy you,” said Apate, but there was no force behind her words. She sounded like she was about to cry.

“Let us out,” croaked Dolus. “What do you want?”

“Oh, it’s simple!” Pirithous said. “Bind yourself to me, as all these others have done before you. Serve the Court of the Dead. Swear your oath, and I will release you. Understand, you are not who I’m after. Together, we will bring Hades to his knees!”

Hazel could see it in the gods’ faces—they were about to relent. They could not stand the pain. And once Pirithous had them on his side, he would be more powerful than ever. She and her friends would be turned to dust. Pirithous would keep going, collecting followers, enslaving the gods themselves, until finally her father would have no choice but to respond—and possibly be enslaved.

“No,” she decided. She turned to her friends. “We can’t flee.”

Asterion nodded solemnly. “We are outnumbered. I do not think we can win. But if we must fight, I will be honored to die at your side.”

Arielle grimaced. “I can’t believe I am saying this, but me, too. I will fight with you, Hazel Levesque.”

Quinoa grunted. “Why not? Even the best grain can’t last forever. Say when.”

A warm sensation coursed through Hazel’s body. At first, she thought it was simply gratitude for having these friends at her side. And that was part of it, yes. But it was also a sense that something had changed, like a shifting tide.

She scanned the park.

There. Down the road to the south, about a hundred feet from the plaza, a group of people were running in their direction. And the one in the lead wore a bomber jacket.

Hazel laughed with delight, startling even her friends.

Asterion frowned. “What is it, Hazel?”

“The cavalry,” she said. Then she raised her sword and shouted loudly enough for all the mythics to hear. “ATTACK!”

CHAPTER 35

Nico was charging forward in full battle mode when the Mist broke.

Suddenly his body wouldn't respond. A wave of exhaustion brought him to his knees. His legs turned to lead.

Defiance screamed in his chest pouch. Around him, the other Puffs chimed in, howling in pain and outrage.

The world spun. Darkness loomed at the corners of his vision.

"Will?" he called. He felt so weak he wasn't sure if the word made it out of his mouth.

"Nico!" a voice called out. He looked for whoever it was, but he saw no one. He knew his friends must still be close only because of their screaming cacodemons.

Then the voice was closer, speaking right in his ear.

"Nico, listen to me." It was Semele, her tone urgent. "The Mist has been broken. You need to lose your cacodemon *now*."

He struggled to process that. Sweat poured down his face. He didn't want to lose his cacodemon. It was *his* cacodemon. But maybe that was just Defiance being defiant.

"I don't understand…." His throat felt cracked and dry.

He managed to turn his head. His friends were all in similar distress. Lavinia lay flat on her back, her magical dance shoes making her legs twitch as if they might do the jitterbug all on their own. Poor Orcus had beak-planted on the pavement, his wings splayed like he was doing his impression of roadkill. And Will…

Oh, gods—no. Will was curled into a fetal position. He was sobbing along with his Puff, Loneliness, which radiated heartbreak so strong Nico could practically see the emotion rippling through the air.

"Stand up, son of Hades!" commanded Semele. Her voice was like a slap to the face. "You will *not* die this way!"

Die? he thought. *Am I dying?*

But that wasn't what shocked him to his senses. It was the realization that Will needed his help. Somehow, he got to one knee. His muscles screamed in protest.

He raised his eyes, trying to focus on Semele. At best, he expected to see a wisp of gray, but the apparition before him was so bright it seared his retinas.

Semele was made of stars and smoke, like a fireworks display frozen in midair. The colors were too intense to stare at directly, but if Nico looked at her from the corner of his eye, he saw a beautiful woman in a flowing white chiton, her hair a cascade of amber ringlets, her eyes like quasars in a misty nebula.

He tried to remember how to speak. "Is this…you?"

"My true form," she agreed. "Nico, your Puffs have been heightening your senses, letting you see through the Mist. But now the Mist has shattered. You cannot stand such intense exposure to reality. If you don't dull your minds, you will burn."

Her words…actually made sense. Of course, Semele had been the only one who couldn't carry a cacodemon. She was unaffected. But the rest of them had gone into battle with their Puffs, preparing for the Mist. It was like they'd acclimated their eyes to darkness so they could detect even the slightest glimmer of light. Now, with the Mist broken, they'd stepped out of a dark movie theater into the blazing sun of high noon.

He looked past Semele's shimmering form, though his eyes felt like they were melting. The world was too three-dimensional. The trees vibrated with life. The smell of eucalyptus was so pungent it made him swoon. He heard the distant screaming of panicked mortals, the whir of helicopter blades somewhere over the horizon. In front of the de Young Museum, a confrontation was in progress. He could make out the dark robes of the three judges.

And there stood Hazel, facing them, her spatha at the ready, but everyone's attention seemed to be on the sky directly overhead. Was that a funnel cloud descending? Did San Francisco have tornadoes?

"What—what do you mean *burn*?" he asked Semele.

The eidolon huffed with impatience. "I mean *burn*. Look at your friends!"

She was right. Frank's body had begun to steam. Savannah was writhing, smoke tapering from her fingers like extinguished candles. And Will…

No, Nico thought. He couldn't let them die. There wasn't time to help them all remove their Puffs. He could barely make his own hands work. He drew on Defiance's strength, which was probably the exact thing he *shouldn't* do, and screamed, "Cocoa Puffs, to me!"

He was dimly aware of Semele shouting, cursing his idiocy…or maybe that was his own inner voice. The cacodemons screeched in unison. The ones who hadn't been paired with anyone reached him first. The others in harnesses wriggled free of their pouches and bounced toward him in a frenzied stampede. But they didn't just gather around him—they melted *into* him, returning to the dark cradle of Nico's soul from which they'd sprung.

It felt right, welcoming them home. It was also overwhelming, suffocating, and incendiary. He tasted soot. Smoke filled his lungs. His vision began to dim, but he could see Will stirring, opening his eyes. His friends were sitting up, looking around in bewilderment. Good. That was something.

"Nico!" Will scrambled over and took his shoulders. "What—what did you do?"

"It's okay," he croaked.

"It is *not* okay!" Will shook him, as if that might dislodge the cacodemons. He looked around desperately, and then locked his eyes on Semele. "Can you do anything? Please!"

Nico reached for Will's hand. He didn't feel so good. He'd seen a number of monsters go up in flames before. Now he finally knew how they must have felt.

Semele's voice cut through the pain, so close she might have been inside his head. "Nico, do you trust me?"

He fell into Will's arms as the darkness pushed him toward unconsciousness. "I do," he murmured. "With my life."

"I am going to ask permission to do something," she said. "I want your consent for me to possess you."

Nico's vision was almost gone, but he could dimly see Frank standing over him, his expression a mixture of fear and alarm.

"I can give you strength," Semele continued. "I can help you survive this."

Nico remembered a distant conversation, maybe from another life. "But…you don't possess people anymore. You lose part of yourself every time."

"I will take that risk!" Her voice seemed to catch in her throat, though she didn't have a throat in this form. "I admit I have never done this with a willing party before. I am not sure what will happen. But I know what it is to burn. I cannot let that happen to you. Please, do you consent?"

Nausea roiled in his stomach. He was okay with dying if it saved his friends. But he also saw the pain in Will's eyes. He knew he couldn't leave him like this, not if there was any other way.

“I consent,” he said. “Please help me.”

Instantly, he sensed another identity in his mind. He’d never spent much time thinking about his own consciousness, but now he could clearly feel the boundaries of his self, because he was being forced to share his skull with a roommate. A second self had pushed its way in—a personality so full of energy and life that Nico thought his brain might burst.

Absorbing the cacodemons was one thing. At least they had been part of him to begin with. But this was too much. No brain was meant to hold two entire lives.

Easy, said a voice inside him—Semele’s familiar smoky tenor. *I know this is uncomfortable, but if you accept my presence, we can work together.*

His mind instinctively fought her intrusion. He pressed his hands to his temples and let loose an anguished cry.

“It’s not working,” Will fretted. “You’re killing him!”

“No,” Nico managed to say. Or was it Semele using his voice? “Wait.”

I’m sorry, Nico. Semele’s voice was deeply distressed. *I have not done this in many centuries. I do not want to hurt you.*

Nico believed her. Semele may have acted aloof at first, but she had never shown him anything but respect. She didn’t want to harm anyone.

She just wanted to help.

His consciousness began to stitch together with hers over this epiphany—their shared desire to protect the ones they loved.

You understand me, she said.

“I do,” he said aloud.

Nico sensed Semele’s character, her memories, her centuries of life. She had been so many different things. She had suffered, and lost, and suffered more. There was too much history for him to absorb at once, but he understood her basic goodness, her determination, her hard-won understanding of her own identity. It seemed to fit perfectly with Nico’s own.

The darkness began to fade away. In its place, a new feeling grew:

Power.

It expanded from his mind into his chest, and then out to his limbs. The ache in his muscles evaporated. His pulse stopped pounding in his temples. With Will's help, he stood. He no longer felt like he was going to fall over and disintegrate.

He breathed in, and this time, he knew he was breathing for two souls.

Will studied his face with concern. "Are you okay? Are you…you?"

Nico kissed him. He felt the same electric charge right down to his toes that he'd felt with their very first kiss.

"Yep," he decided. "I'm still me. Now let's get to work."

He turned to survey the bizarre scene in the park. There were mythics everywhere—hundreds crowded together in the plaza, just as Naomi had described, and another group encircling them, no doubt allies of Pirithous.

The funnel cloud had disappeared, but where it had touched down, two unearthly figures now lay on the pavement, struggling under the weight of a giant black chain. Nico had no idea who they were, but they were screaming in pain as Pirithous paraded around them, his arms wide while he yelled at the sky—something about Hades.

Pirithous. Semele's voice was a snarl at the back of Nico's occipital lobe. *I would like to destroy him now.*

"Agreed," said Nico.

"What?" Will asked.

"Sorry—talking to myself. To Semele. It doesn't matter. Is everyone okay?"

His friends nodded. Lavinia did a little tap dance, just to make sure she still could. Savannah drew her sword. Yazan and Deion gave each other a fist bump. Johan helped Lucius Silver to his feet and then said, "I think we could all use a nice cup of tea after this, but right now, yes. I am ready to boop some heads."

"Bust some heads," Frank offered. "That's the expression."

From across the plaza, Pirithous's voice rang out. "Together, we will bring Hades to his knees!"

Anger burned triple-hot in Nico's chest—his own, Semele's, and the concentrated fury of his cacodemon Anger. He drew his Stygian sword and charged, his friends at his side.

They'd closed half the distance when Hazel's voice reached them. "ATTACK!"

And the park devolved into chaos.

When Hazel Levesque yells “ATTACK!” and charges you with a sword, followed by an angry Minotaur, the only sensible thing to do is run. Nico saw Pirithous do just that—at least at first. The judge scrambled back to the safety of his own guards as Hazel led her forces forward, taking control of the museum’s front drive and forming a defensive ring around the two chained beings.

We must reach her, Semele said in Nico’s mind.

Well, duh, Nico replied.

No need to be rude, said Semele. *Just because I am in your mind does not mean I can read everything in it.*

They crashed into a line of dog-headed cynocephalus warriors who had been facing the other direction, thinking the main threat was from Hazel’s friends in the plaza. They were not expecting eight angry demigods, a blemmyae, and the world’s tiniest griffin to attack them from behind.

One dog-man ran away yipping and whining with Orcus clamped to his head, pecking at his left eye. Another staggered off, clutching Deion’s spear, which was lodged in his gut. Will loosed multiple arrows, and pride filled Nico’s heart as all of them found their targets. Each of the warriors burst into dust, and the rest scattered when a full-size male lion jumped into their midst, roaring and baring his fangs.

Where did the lion come from? Semele wondered.

That would be Frank, Nico guessed.

I have questions, said Semele.

Later! said Nico.

They continued their push forward, wading through the temporarily confused ranks of Team Pirithous. Down in the plaza, the situation looked like the most violent Black Friday sale ever. Imprisoned mythics rushed in every direction, trying to overrun the circle of guards. Harpies fought harpies above the cypress trees. Giants threw park benches at other giants. A giant crab—why was there a giant crab?—scuttled sideways through the bedlam, holding a screaming

telkhine in either claw. Once the armies of prisoners and captors clashed, things got even more confusing, as nobody seemed to know which side anyone was on.

“Nico!”

Hazel rushed toward him, grinning as she sliced down an enemy donkey satyr—the same strange courier they’d followed into the Court of the Dead days ago. Asterion and Arielle were on either side of her, the karpos Quinoa flying around them like an avenging grain angel.

Hazel threw herself into Nico’s arms. “You made it!”

Nico blinked back tears. He’d never been so happy to see his sister, even if she smelled like she’d been hanging out in a monster’s dirty-laundry hamper.

Johan sobbed as he embraced Arielle. Quinoa and Orcus collided in midair trying to hug each other. Semele made Nico’s body pull Asterion into the group hug, and then she used his voice to shout, “I love you, you big, beautiful cow!”

Asterion seemed a bit startled, but he accepted the hug. “Is that—Semele?”

“Yes, it’s me!” Nico grinned. Then he regained control of himself. “I mean, yes, it’s her. She’s possessing me. Kind of. Long story.”

The other mythics looked at him dumbfounded.

Hazel shook her head in amazement. “Well, I guess it’s not the weirdest thing I’ve heard in the past couple of days.” Then she spotted the lion padding toward her, his fangs bloody from biting the butt of many a retreating dog-man.

“Frank!” she squealed. “What a good kitty!”

The lion morphed back into Frank just as Hazel flew into his arms and kissed him. “I’m *so* happy to see you!”

“Friends, we must be quick!” Asterion warned, grabbing an enemy harpy out of the air and throwing her into the nearest parked car. “Pirithous has imprisoned two gods. We must free them before they can pledge to his cause!”

That jolted Nico out of his temporary euphoria. “What? How?”

“Also a long story,” Hazel said, but she did her best to explain as quickly as possible.

Even with two minds inside his brain, Nico wasn’t sure he understood it all: twin gods of trickery, chains of Prometheus, oaths and traps, and trading up to capture Hades himself.

Meanwhile, Pirithous's forces were overcoming their initial panic. The judge himself, now protected by two Cyclopes and the red-robed skeletal guards from the court, had rediscovered his courage. He climbed onto the pedestal of a cement sphinx about fifty yards away and started barking orders—"Kill them! Kill them!"—while imperiously waving his gavel.

Now that Nico knew about the chains of Prometheus, he understood why so many minor gods had pledged to serve this self-important chief justice. He also understood why those gods had not yet jumped into battle. They probably didn't like Pirithous any better than Nico did. But with Pirithous giving them direct orders, they had no choice but to obey.

Things were about to get dicey for Team Hazel and the Mythics.

"Perhaps freeing those gods should not be the first priority right now," said Arielle, her expression anguished. "We need to get our fellow mythics out of here safely!"

"Also," said Quinoa, "did we mention that the twins are gods of *trickery*? Before they got chained up, they exploded two judges and Laverna. There was talk of exploding *more* people, and the only choice they were offering was Cajun spice or extra crispy!"

Nico had to admit that didn't sound good.

"You know we're right here," said Dolus.

"We can hear you," agreed his sister, Apate.

Their necks were charred and smoking beneath their Stygian iron shackles. Their bodies trembled from the aftershocks of immense pain. They could barely lift their heads enough to meet Nico's eyes.

"I'm not going to leave anyone in chains," Nico decided. "Not if we can figure out a way to help."

His half sister smiled at him. "There's the Nico I know and love." She glanced at Asterion. "How 'bout you help evacuate the other mythics? They'll follow you. Nico and I will figure out these chains."

Asterion nodded. "As you wish, Hazel. Please take care of yourself. Arielle, Johan, Quinoa, Orcus, with me!"

"I'll just stay here," said Semele through Nico's voice. "Be careful, you gorgeous cow."

Wow, do you have to? Nico asked.

Yes, Semele said. *Yes, I do.*

As the mythics marched into battle to help their comrades, Hazel faced the other demigods. “Can you all buy us some time? We can’t let Pirithous get near these two gods. Otherwise, I’m afraid they’ll pledge their loyalty to him. The pain is just too much.”

Right on cue, the iron shackles began to glow red. Dolus and Apate screamed, writhing in agony.

Frank scowled. “Legionnaires, you heard her. We protect this position at all costs. *Orbem instruite!*”

“Praetor!” the demigods replied in unison. Then they formed a circle around the chained gods, facing outward with their weapons ready. Will, who wasn’t so up-to-date on Latin commands, looked confused for a second and then added, “Um, yeah, what they said.” He took up a position next to Savannah and got ready to glow, to heal, to send some arrows flying, or to throw Kit Kat bars, depending on what was required.

That left Hazel and Nico to deal with the chains of Prometheus.

Hazel frowned at Nico. “So…you’re possessed. How does that feel?”

He shrugged. “Pretty cool, to be honest. Semele saved my life, so I’m not going to complain.”

Thank you, said Semele. *It was a strange sensation to be granted permission, but for now, I much prefer this to the old ways.*

For now? Nico asked. *Meaning what?*

Focus, she ordered.

He wasn’t comforted by that, but he turned his attention to the problem at hand. He knelt next to Dolus and Apate. The shackles had cooled again, leaving the two gods whimpering and gasping for breath.

“Any idea how to get these off?” he asked them.

“If we knew how,” grumbled Apate, “don’t you think we would have done it?”

Dolus wheezed. “I don’t want to pledge myself to that fool Pirithous,” he said, “but your sister is correct. If he asks again…I’m not sure I’ll be able to resist. You *have* to free us.”

“Then there’s the little matter of you two being the gods of trickery,” Hazel noted. “How do we know you won’t turn on us? Or just kill *everyone*, including our friends?”

Apate glanced up. Like many gods, her face was unearthly, beautiful and terrifying at the same time, but her desperate expression struck Nico as very human.

“You tried to warn us, Hazel Levesque,” said the goddess. “You alone understood who we were, even when we weren’t telling the truth. We will not harm you if you help us. Look at me. Am I lying?”

Hazel narrowed her eyes. “No. I don’t think so. But honestly, I would help you anyway. No one should be chained like this.”

“Strongly agree,” Dolus said. “Especially when it’s me.”

Nico stood and hefted his sword. “That just leaves the question of *how*. Hazel, stand back….”

Semele spoke in his mind: *That isn’t…*

Nico brought his blade down on one of the chain’s links, using his own strength combined with Semele’s. Stygian iron met Stygian iron with a horrific *CLANG!* Sparks of pure black energy sprayed across the pavement, sizzling as they fell on the gods’ skin. Dolus and Apate both howled.

The impact made Nico’s body vibrate so violently that the cacodemons reemerged from him, dropping to the ground with startled sounds of *Eep, eep, eep!*

. . . *going to work*, Semele finished.

“Huh,” Nico muttered. “That knocked the Cocoa Puffs right out of me.”

“Is that a euphemism?” Apate asked.

“No, it’s…never mind. Thought it was worth a try.”

“Well, it wasn’t!” Dolus protested.

All across the plaza, the battle was heating up. The imprisoned mythics had made a hole in Pirithous’s lines to the east. Arielle and Quinoa were shepherding them through it while Asterion guarded their retreat, fending off a pursuing squad of dracaenae with help from Johan, Orcus, and a few stalwart Laistrygonian allies. The baby drakon was locked in combat with one of Pirithous’s largest Cyclopes. Smaller skirmishes spread across the entire park, and it was not at all clear which side was winning. The three Underworld gods—the di inferi—were busy summoning an army of the undead, which wasn’t going to help matters.

Worst of all, Nico’s attempt to break the chains had gotten Pirithous’s attention.

“Stop them!” screamed the judge from his well-guarded pedestal. “Go! Go!”

After a moment’s hesitation, his Cyclopes advanced, followed by the red-robed skeletons with their two-pronged spears.

“Frank!” Nico called. “Don’t let those bidents touch you. They weren’t set to kill when the skeletons teleported their victims to the plaza, but I don’t think we’ll be so lucky this time.”

Frank scowled. *“Bidents?”*

“Yeah, you know!” Nico fought down his impatience. “Poseidon has a trident. The two-pointed ones are bidents. They’re symbols of Hades. They tend to be pretty nasty weapons.”

Will looked back at him as if wondering whether Nico was joking. “*Bident* sounds like a bisexual breath freshener,” he said. After a beat, he added, “And actually, I kind of want that now.”

“Hello?” called Dolus, reclaiming Nico’s attention. “Chained gods here?”

“Right,” Nico said. “Ideas?”

Hazel turned up her hands. “Maybe…we hit the chains together?”

“No!” yelped Apate.

I have a suggestion, Semele said. *The entire council of gods had to agree to put Prometheus in chains. To unlock these chains, we may need a council.*

Nico relayed this message out loud. “Only problem is,” he added, “we don’t have a council of gods.”

Defiance made a sneezing noise. The Puff hopped over to the nearest chain link, opened his mouth wider than should have been possible, and began chewing on the Stygian iron.

Dolus leaned away from the Puff. “Wh-what is that thing? I have never seen anything like it!”

“It’s a cacodemon,” said Nico. “Specifically made from *me*. It’s a long story; I’ll tell it once we get you free.”

Dolus stared at him in disbelief. “But then it’s a kind of daimon. Like Apate and me. They’re *gods*. Very, very, very minor gods, perhaps. But still technically gods!”

Hazel gave Nico a skeptical look. “A council of Cocoa Puffs?”

Even with Semele’s life force added to his, Nico felt like he might pass out. His cute little demonic emotions were…*gods*? The implications were too much for him to handle. On the other hand, they were running out of time.

“Incoming!” yelled Savannah as the Cyclopes barreled toward them.

“Nico, now would be good!” said Will, who fired off an arrow that bounced off one of the Cyclopes’s knees.

Nico felt Semele once again taking over his voice. He didn't fight her.

"I will help," she said through him. "Dolus, Apate—I am Semele Thyone. Do you know that name?"

The twin gods looked at her—looked at *Nico*—with total shock. He didn't know what Semele was talking about. The details of her life were all jumbled together in his brain. But clearly, the title *Thyone* meant something to the gods.

"You…how?" Dolus said.

"A story for another time," said the eidolon through Nico. "If I free you and you betray us…you will regret it. I take it you are familiar with my son?"

Apate started to shiver, and Nico didn't think it was from the agony of the chains this time. "We would never betray you. Him. Any of you! Just please, free us!"

Nico had questions now, but he put them aside. He felt energy course through him. He placed the tip of his blade against one link of the chain, right next to the spot where Defiance was chewing.

"Cocoa Puffs," said Semele, "I summon you to a council of judgment. Shall we break these chains and free our fellow gods?"

The Puffs yipped and howled, hopping over to join Defiance in gnawing at the chain. Nico pushed his blade downward against the Stygian iron link. It cut like butter.

Pirithous couldn't possibly have seen this from so far away, but he must have felt it somehow. He screamed, "NO!" and fell to his knees.

The Cyclopes and skeletal guards charged Frank, only steps away.

The chains of Prometheus burst, one link after another, like a string of firecrackers, until the shackles fell away smoking from Dolus's and Apate's necks.

The gods stood shakily, gasping for air.

"You—actually did it," Dolus said.

"You saved us!" Apate said.

"Now help *us*!" yelled Nico/Semele.

Nico was hoping for some vaporizing and extra-crispy exploding. Instead, the twin gods locked their eyes on a news helicopter that was now circling the park. This would all be on the evening news, Nico imagined, and soon racking up millions of views on every social media platform.

“First,” Apate said, “we must heal the Mist.”

“It’s time for some deception,” Dolus agreed. “I do love deception.”

The two gods faced each other and locked hands, moving closer until their foreheads touched.

“You are my counterpart,” said Dolus.

“You are my other half,” said Apate.

Smiles spread across their faces. The air pressure dropped. A mighty *BOOM!* knocked Nico off his feet.

Suddenly, the park was strangely quiet. Nico sat up, his head swimming, his vision blurry.

The Cyclopes who’d been about to attack Frank were gone. So was Frank. And Hazel. And Will. Nico struggled to his feet. Panic rose in his chest.

“What did you do?” he demanded of the gods.

But Apate and Dolus were also missing.

“Meow?” said a tiny voice from the spot where Hazel had been. Nico blinked. He looked down. Rubbed his eyes. Then he scanned the entire plaza.

Where there had once been a raging battle of gods and mythics, there were now hundreds and hundreds of small, furry, cute animals. The entire park was full of *house cats*.

“Will?” Nico called out.

An orange tabby meowed and pawed at his boot.

“No,” he said. “This is not happening.”

He realized that Dolus and Apate had *vastly* overcompensated with the Mist. His senses had gone from fully prepared for Mist, to overexposed with no Mist at all, to completely unprepared for extra-heavy Mist. His brain had Mist-lash. Was that a thing? All he knew was that when you have to guess which cat is your boyfriend, you have a problem.

Nico, Semele said, *I know I told you to lose your Puff. Now I think you should* find *your Puff.*

“Yeah…yeah, you’re right.” His hands trembled, but he started walking around the pavement, picking up cats. “Defiance?”

“Meow.”

“Defiance?”

“Meow.”

How was this possible? Was everyone in the park seeing the same illusion? Nico looked very human to himself. What did he look like to everyone else? Maybe they were all wandering around, picking one another up and wondering if this kitty was a friend or an enemy. Or maybe the fight was still going on and Nico just couldn’t see it.

Finally, he hefted a huge black Maine coon. “Defiance?”

The fluffy sack of fur bared its fangs and hissed.

All around Nico, the change was instantaneous. The cats vanished. Now he saw a park full of mortals, mythics, and minor gods standing around and looking confused. Many were grabbing at the air or dodging unseen threats, like each person was wearing a VR headset and playing a different game.

Defiance, once again a toothy ball of darkness, purred proudly in Nico’s arms.

“Demigods!” Nico called out. “If you can hear me, grab a Cocoa Puff!”

Everybody just kept playing their virtual-reality cat games.

He spotted Will, leaning over Lavinia, combing through her pink hair like something important was hidden in there. Nico grabbed Loneliness and pressed the Puff into Will's hands.

Will gasped. His eyes cleared. "Nico? What—"

Duck! warned Semele.

Fortunately, Nico had a mental connection to her. He understood that she meant *Hit the deck* and not *Look out, there is an actual duck attacking you*, because either scenario was genuinely possible. He tackled Will and they dropped to the ground as a harpy swooped down at them, her talons extended.

Whether the harpy actually meant to attack them or was lost in some illusion, Nico wasn't sure, but she flew on, screeching in outrage.

"What the actual Hades?" Will grumbled.

"You okay?" Nico asked.

"Yeah. I mean…under the circumstances? I think Dolus and Apate went too hard on the Mist."

"Just a bit." Nico scanned the crowd. There—hovering over the biggest fountain—the twin gods were waving their arms like symphony conductors, laughing as confused mythics ran into one another or tried to fistfight with lampposts.

"Can you get the Puffs paired off with our friends again?" Nico asked. "I have some gods to strangle."

"On it," Will promised.

Nico ran for the plaza, dodging and weaving through hallucinating crowds and holding his Puff like a football.

A telkhine rushed at him, snarling and snapping its teeth, but Nico bounded out of the way. He didn't want to attack anyone he didn't have to. He couldn't be sure which mythics were friends. For all he knew, the poor telkhine just thought Nico was a particularly vicious house cat.

He stumbled, trying to leap over the baby drakon. Defiance tumbled out of his arms. The world shimmered. Nico lost his balance and slammed sideways into a tree. When the yellow spots of pain faded from his eyes, he found himself in a nightmarish new illusion.

Standing next to him was a lady in the most stereotypical witch costume he'd ever seen—long black cloak, pointy hat, warty prosthetic nose, and a straw broom in one hand. She was yelling at a guy in a cheap plastic Superman outfit.

“Hello?” she screamed.

“What?” Superman screamed back.

“Hello?”

“What?”

It was scintillating conversation, but Nico left them to it. He pushed past a person in an inflatable T. rex costume, and then a zombie with fake blood on his face.

The entire plaza was now a Halloween party.

“Defiance!” he called out. “Where are you?”

Defiance didn’t answer, probably because it was being defiant.

We must keep going, said Semele. *I will do my best to help you focus.*

Nico growled in frustration, but he knew she was right. He turned toward the central fountain. Floating over it now were a couple in elaborate Day of the Dead costumes—La Catrina with her lacy hoopskirt and floppy hat bedecked with flowers, El Catrin with his rhinestone-studded black mariachi suit, both with their faces painted like jewel-encrusted skulls. They were dancing a waltz in midair, singing to each other as the world around them disintegrated into a series of psychedelic nightmares.

Dolus and Apate. Obviously.

Nico sprinted toward them, determined to end the gods’ reverie.

Hazel gasped.

Suddenly, the world made sense again. One minute, she’d been surrounded by cute, whimpering puppy dogs. Now the puppies were gone, turned back into confused-looking people. She was holding a Cocoa Puff in her hands, and Frank was grinning at her.

“Welcome back,” he said. “I gave you Anger. He’s a good friend of mine.”

Sure enough, Hazel felt supercharged with rage. Of course, she'd felt that way ever since she'd met the accursed Court of the Dead, so it didn't bother her much. Her senses were all on high alert—like ADHD-plus-twelve-espressos high alert.

"I am really angry," she announced. "But also, I really love you."

Frank laughed. "Same. Will ran off to help Nico. Give me a hand distributing more Puffs?"

Hazel surveyed the plaza. The mythics seemed be having varying degrees of success seeing through this new veil of superthick Mist. Some were standing around in a daze like they were trying to remember where they'd parked their chariots. Others were still fighting, although a few were locked in mortal combat with trees or park benches.

Asterion seemed to still have his wits about him. He continued to herd the mythics away from danger, stopping only long enough to fling an aggressive gigantic ant into an abandoned hot dog cart.

Hazel spotted Nico racing toward the central fountain, where Dolus and Apate were dancing a waltz in the air. Will was trying to catch up to him, dodging and weaving through a flock of hallucinating harpies.

Then she remembered who had started this chaos in the first place: *Pirithous.* Where was that pompous pile of…? There. Running away, of course, with his two skeletal guards trailing behind him. And they were headed straight for Camp Jupiter's Chevy van, which Frank's crew must have driven here.

"Oh, Hades, no," she muttered. "Frank, keep at it with the Puffs. I have a judge to catch."

Before he could protest, she sprinted off, Anger barking its approval in her arms.

Even with the Cocoa Puff heightening her senses, the Mist was harder to navigate than she'd ever experienced. Her skin tingled all over like she was running through a cold fog.

It kept throwing illusionary obstacles in her path—puppies to trip on, brick walls to crash through, fiery pits to jump over—but she forged ahead, ignoring what her eyes tried to tell her.

She knew the Mist. She could navigate these currents of weirdness.

Come on, Hazel! she told herself. *You can do this.*

With a cry of determination, Hazel shoved the Mist away, creating a small radius in front of her where reality shifted back into place.

She heard the flutter of leafy wings behind her, and Quinoa perched on her shoulder. "Hazel, why was everything and everyone a *dog* just now?"

“Mist,” she said, sweat pouring down her face. “Sorry. I need to concentrate. This is so much more powerful than what I’m used to.”

“No problem!” said the karpos. “But I’m sticking with you. I much prefer cats anyway. What’s the plan?”

Hazel pointed up ahead. “Pirithous.”

“Oh, yeah.” Quinoa cracked his tiny knuckles. “I’ve got some things to discuss with that— LOOK OUT!”

Kelli the empousa pounced from out of nowhere, landing on Hazel and knocking her to the ground. Hazel managed a wild slash with her spatha, cutting clean through Kelli’s cheerleader jersey. The empousa screamed “NOT AGAIN!” as she exploded into dust and pom-pom tassels, but the back of Hazel’s head slammed against the asphalt. Anger was thrown from her arms. Quinoa shrieked as he catapulted off her shoulder.

Hazel wheezed, struggling to sit up. She’d lost her hold on the Mist.

The world had changed again. The scent of freshly popped popcorn hit her nostrils. She heard the whimsical melody of a carousel. A tall man nearly crashed into her, his view obstructed by an enormous stuffed teddy bear.

She was in the midst of a fully functioning carnival.

Nico weaved around a ghost—not a real one, but someone wearing a sheet with eyeholes. He did his best to push his panic down, but even with Semele’s help, his brain was having trouble piercing the Mist. The plaza still looked like a Halloween party in which everyone was sleepwalking through different nightmares.

“Dolus! Apate!” he screamed. “You have to stop this!”

If the twin gods heard him, they didn’t respond. They just kept waltzing and singing to each other in their fancy skeleton costumes.

“Nico!” said a muffled voice. Someone grabbed him by the shoulder from behind, making Nico yelp. He spun, his sword ready to run through whoever it was, but he froze as he found himself facing…a giant banana.

At least, it was someone in a very realistic giant banana costume, with oversize sunglasses covering the eyeholes.

“Nico, it’s me!” the banana said, the voice muffled behind layers of yellow foam padding.

“Me who? I don’t know any bananas!”

“It’s Will!” he said. “Wait, I’m a banana?”

“It’s the Mist,” Nico said. “And I lost my Cocoa Puff.”

Banana Will offered him a regular-size banana. “Here, take mine! You need it more.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Where are the others? Did you get them sorted out?”

“I think so,” Will said. “At least, I got Frank and Yazan reunited with their Puffs, and they’re helping the others. I wanted to follow you, though. Thought you might need the help.”

Nico felt equally exasperated and grateful. He would’ve hugged his boyfriend if he weren’t a giant banana with sunglasses.

“It’s fine,” he decided. “Keep your banana—I mean your Puff. I can see well enough. The twins are just up ahead.”

“Lead on!” said Banana Will.

First, Nico took a moment to still his mind, the way Mr. D had taught him. *Breathe. Find a center of calmness.*

Within him, Semele’s mind reacted well to this idea. A comforting warmth spread through Nico’s body.

Did he teach you that? she asked, obviously pleased. *That’s an excellent lesson.*

She lent him her focus, and despite the chaos around them, Nico’s thoughts started to clear, as if all the sediment of his jumbled emotions were settling to the bottom of his skull.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw regular non-banana Will standing next to him, his fingers curled around Loneliness like a baseball.

“Better?” Will asked.

“Somewhat,” he admitted. But mythics were still fighting all across the park. The di inferi were sending their army of undead into battle, and Nico was pretty sure those lost souls would not be affected by the Mist. They would hack down anyone in their path—mythic, demigod, house cat, or banana.

Nico had hoped the minor gods would be freed from Pirithous once the chains of Prometheus were broken, but maybe they *liked* working for him…or maybe something else was needed to free them.

Like the death of Pirithous, Semele suggested.

“That could be arranged,” Nico said.

“What?” Will asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “First things first. Let’s stop this Mist-pocalypse.”

The closer they got to Apate and Dolus, the harder it became to move. After another few feet, Will stumbled.

“Nico?” he cried. “Are you still here?”

“Right in front of you!” Nico said, taking his hand.

Will’s eyes stared through him. “I can’t— I can *hear* you, but…”

Nico looked down at Loneliness, who was now fast asleep in Will’s palm.

They must be exhausted, Semele said. *They will not be able to help much longer.*

Worry spiked in Nico again. He had never considered that the Puffs had limited energy, just like he did.

How are you holding up? Semele asked. *Do you not feel the strain?*

“Not really,” he said. “I mean…I’m a little tired, but it’s nothing like I was before.”

Hmm. Perhaps these two selves in one body will not end badly.

Nico did not like the ominous sound of that, but he needed to take care of Will first.

“Just keep hold,” he told his boyfriend. “Can you feel my hand?”

Will swallowed, clearly trying not to freak out, but he managed to nod. “Okay. Yes. It feels like I’m holding a tiger’s tail, but I’ll assume it’s your hand.”

“I’ll lead you,” Nico promised. Then he muttered an apology to the sleeping Loneliness.

“Hold on, my other Puffs, wherever you are,” he said. “Just help us for a little bit longer.”

They ran for the center of the park.

For a few steps, Nico thought they would make it. He could feel the Mist fighting against him like a hallucinogenic headwind, pushing him back, filling his senses with false impressions. But he

kept going, tapping into Semele's seemingly boundless strength as he clung desperately to Will's hand.

Then, only twenty feet from the fountain, an unseen force hit him in the gut. He lost hold of Will, falling forward and catching himself with his palms, which scraped painfully against the concrete.

"Nico!" Will called.

"Still here," Nico groaned.

"Nico? Nico, where are you?"

Oh, no, he thought.

Will couldn't even hear him now.

Worse: Nico had lost his own grip on reality. When he looked around him, he saw nothing but endless statues. Some were cartoonishly inaccurate depictions of gods locked in battle. Others were abstract art—cubes and pipes and polygons all collapsing together. Others were Egyptian obelisks, or bronze busts of historical figures.

"Will!" he called out as he pushed himself up. "Will?"

His boyfriend had vanished.

It was horribly silent in the park. Nico spun around as terror rose in him.

Then a sharp pain pierced him between his eyes, so intense he almost dropped his blade. He saw stars. His heart felt like it was beating deep inside his brain.

"What is this?" he said, his voice slurring.

I'm so sorry, Nico, said Semele. *I was afraid of this. We eidolons, when we possess, we take over a mind.*

I know that, he thought. *But I gave you consent.*

Even so, your mind is fighting back, she said. *If I don't leave you soon, your identity may be consumed by mine, and I do not want that. If I* do *leave you, your mind will be exposed and vulnerable. The Mist is so strong here, you might be permanently damaged.*

Nico clenched his fists, though the pain of his chafed palms made him nauseated. He was only twenty feet from the twin gods…so close. But now Will was alone, and his eidolon lifeline had turned into a noose. He was out of options. He had no idea what to do.

CHAPTER 38

Hazel's brain ached as it tried to process what she was seeing.

A large Ferris wheel loomed to her right, flashing with cheerful multicolored lights as it spun. Kids giggled and shrieked with joy as they ran to a booth selling funnel cake. She could even *smell* it. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her how long it had been since she'd last had a meal.

"Hazel!" cried Quinoa.

When she looked for the source of the voice, all she saw was a large stick of pink cotton candy abandoned on the sidewalk.

"Hazel, on your feet!" the cotton candy screeched. "Pirithous is getting away!"

No, *he isn't*, she thought. *I will not disappoint my friends!*

Hazel reached out with her senses, pushing against the Mist, though every breath hurt her lungs.

She needed to work *with* the Mist, she reminded herself—to find the currents and use them. Fortunately, the currents in the park were now like class-six whitewater rapids. She caught them and channeled them—blasting them outward.

The cotton candy became her karpos friend Quinoa. The Ferris wheel melted into clear blue sky. The kids at the funnel cake booth morphed into the Stymphalian bird collective Gregory, who was swarming around one of Pirithous's Cyclops guards.

And there was Pirithous himself, climbing into Camp Jupiter's Chevy minivan. One of his skeletal guardians was behind the wheel. The motor was already revving. Were skeletons allowed to drive in San Francisco? She watched as the van began to make a U-turn.

Hazel let loose an anguished howl. She'd felt like this before, years and years ago, when she was in Gaea's cavern in Alaska—a helpless pawn in someone else's violent plan. She refused to fail like that again.

She pressed her hands against the ground. She called out silently, with all her willpower, reaching past the Mist, beyond all the chaos in the park.

"Hazel, are you okay?" Quinoa's voice was tight with worry.

“Calling a friend,” she muttered.

She didn’t know if this would work. The Chevy was already pulling away from the park.

Then she felt a rumble in the cement beneath her fingers—the rhythmic beat of something running *fast*. And the stallion Arion materialized before her in a cloud of dust.

“Holy horse!” yelped Quinoa.

Hazel grinned. Just seeing her old companion filled her with new hope. “Come on, Quinoa!” She launched herself onto Arion’s back and patted his neck. “Thank you for coming, my friend.”

Quinoa edged away nervously. “Uh, does that horse eat quinoa?”

“He prefers chunks of gold,” Hazel said.

The karpos perked up. “Well, in that case, ride ’em, cowboy!” He fluttered onto Hazel’s shoulder. She raised her spatha, and they charged after the retreating van.

Whoosh!

Another gust of Mist knocked Nico breathless, but at least it made the searing pain in his head subside. For a moment, he saw clearly through the shifting illusions, and what he saw gave him hope: the statues were gone. Will sat right next to him, clearly trying to stay calm and stay put, the way you’re supposed to if you’re lost in the wilderness. And at the far end of the plaza, Asterion was leading hundreds of mythics to safety. All was not lost. It *couldn’t* be.

He rose to his feet. *Stay with me, Semele. I’ll need your help.*

But your mind is rebelling, she said.

“Then let it rebel,” he said aloud. “We have to end this.”

He trudged toward Dolus and Apate, still dancing above the fountain.

There was a dull ache in both his chest *and* head. He felt like he’d been hit by a truck, but he couldn’t stop now.

“Dolus!” he yelled. “Apate!”

Thankfully, they heard him this time. They stopped dancing.

“Demigod!” Dolus grinned in his skeletal face paint, looking genuinely pleased to see him. “Have you come to praise what my counterpart and I have done?”

“You…have…to…stop,” Nico wheezed.

“Stop?” Apate frowned, tilting her wide flowery hat. “But this is what we were asked to do! The Mist is restored!”

“There is *so much* deception happening in this park!” Dolus rubbed his hands gleefully. “We’ve done cats, dogs, Halloween, a carnival—we’re thinking maybe a volcano next—”

“No!” Nico yelped. “I mean, you’ve done an amazing job, but it’s too much. Can you dial it back?”

Apate stared at him blankly. The skeletal paint was not making her face any less terrifying. “Dial it *back*? But we’re having such fun!”

Nico shuddered, feeling Semele take over his voice.

“Remember your vow,” she said. “I am Semele Thyone. And I am *not pleased*.”

Dolus and Apate glanced at each other. Nico recognized the look instantly. It was the same expression he and Bianca had exchanged many times when their mom returned from work and they realized they hadn’t yet done their homework or chores.

“We— Of course!” Dolus stammered.

“Dialing back is fun, too!” Apate said.

Immediately the pressure eased between Nico’s eyes. He could breathe again. All around the park, mythics started to come out of their trances. Will stood, his eyes lighting up when he saw Nico.

“Thank the gods!” he cried, running toward Nico.

But then a harpy swooped down at him, grazing his shoulder. Will tumbled and spun so that his back was against the ground. Panic filled Nico, but as the harpy came for a second pass, Will reached into one of the pockets in his cargo pants and pulled out…

Is that—? Semele said.

It was indeed a wool sock.

Will chucked it at the harpy as it neared him, its mouth open wide in a shriek, and the sock landed perfectly in the back of the harpy's throat. The bird-woman dropped immediately and began to try to cough it up, but the thick wool garment was lodged deep inside.

The harpy shook a few more times and then keeled over, dead.

"You have to be kidding me," said Nico, his mouth open. "Did you *actually* kill something with a wool sock?"

Will grinned wide. "Told you they'd come in handy!"

Semele had more important things to focus on, though. "Dolus, I appreciate your obedience," she said, using Nico's voice.

"You're quite welcome," Dolus said.

"Now," she continued, "if you really want to help, perhaps instead of causing chaos throughout the entire park, you could stop the man who put you in chains. *Focus your deceptions on Pirithous*."

The two gods shared a look of utter delight.

"We had not thought of that!" Apate said. "What a *grand* idea!"

"You must forgive us, Semele Thyone," said Dolus. "We have been ignored and forgotten for so very, very long. I suppose we got carried away!"

"You will be forgiven," she said, "as soon as Pirithous is defeated."

"Then let's go find that bitter buffoon!" exclaimed Apate.

The twin gods flew down to them. Apate grabbed Nico's hands. Dolus grabbed Will's. Together they lifted off, flying back toward the de Young.

When this is over, Nico said to Semele, *you need to explain this "Thyone" thing, and why these gods are so scared of you.*

When this is over, Semele agreed. *But I should really vacate your mind before—*

Not yet, Nico said, because he suspected as soon as Semele left him, he was going to pass out. *When Pirithous is defeated.*

He just hoped he could keep his consciousness intact that long.

Hazel had never been in such a satisfying car wreck.

Arion literally ran circles around the van, and then stopped right in front of it. When the skeletal driver swerved to avoid the sudden magical horse, Arion zipped to one side, allowing the van to careen into the nearest eucalyptus tree.

Hazel didn't love wrecking the camp's only working mortal vehicle, but she did enjoy the sound of Pirithous wailing as he hurtled forward and cracked the windshield with his face.

This is why we always wear our seat belts, kids, she thought.

The skeleton in the driver's seat had gone halfway through the windshield, conducting a violent mind meld with the eucalyptus tree. Hazel didn't think he would be recovering anytime soon. The side door of the Chevy rolled open, and the second skeleton staggered out, drunkenly waving his bident. But he was no match for an angry grain spirit. Quinoa flew under his spear and executed a perfect aerial roundhouse kick to the guard's bony face, causing the skull to pop off and roll under the van. The rest of the guard collapsed in a pile of red robes and bones.

That left only Pirithous, who stumbled out of the passenger's-side door. His judge's robes were in tatters. He still held his gavel, but it had snapped in half, so it now looked like a wilted flower. A large piece of glass was embedded in Pirithous's forehead. The rest of his face didn't look so great, either. If he survived, he would need stitches, plastic surgery, and probably a new left eye.

Somewhere behind Hazel, a voice said, "Well, look who we found!"

She turned to see Apate and Dolus floating in for a landing, carrying Nico and Will by the hands.

Hazel dismounted. She ran to Nico, wrapping him in a hug. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, though his face was even paler than usual and his skin was cold. Will met Hazel's eyes and shook his head, confirming that Nico was going to need medical help, and soon.

Dolus hooted as he looked Pirithous up and down. "Hey, buddy. How's that judicial system working for you?"

Pirithous snarled, but he didn't have enough energy to be properly menacing. "It is not too late," he mumbled, a trickle of blood seeping from his ear. "We can still work together! There's so much *synergy* here! Don't you feel it?"

Apate glanced at her counterpart. “Wow, he doesn’t give up, does he?”

“I still have allies!” Pirithous insisted. “Those gods are bound to me until I release them!”

He pointed his broken gavel at Nico. “Attack *him*! If you believe *at all* in law and order, destroy these criminals, and you will be pardoned! Join our winning side!”

But the fight was petering out of the “winning” side. The plaza was now almost cleared of mythics. Asterion and his allies were cleaning up the last of the enemy forces who hadn’t chosen to desert Pirithous. Only the di inferi and a few other minor gods remained on the field with their army of undead, but they seemed to be holding back. Maybe they were waiting for direct orders to attack from Pirithous—orders that they probably realized were never going to come, because even the most forgotten gods aren’t fools.

Quinoa scowled. “Are the bad guys you fight normally this pathetic?”

“No,” Nico said. “This one is a special case.”

“What?” Pirithous snapped. “What about my case?”

“Forget it,” Nico said. “Apate and Dolus, do you think you could convince the judge here to release the other gods from their vows?”

Dolus grinned. “We’d be delighted.”

Pirithous backed up against the van. “Don’t you dare! I’m the hero here! I’m—”

He started to scream and claw at his eyes, which were already not in great shape. “Get them away from me! Get them away!”

The twin gods hadn’t moved, but they’d clearly done something to the judge’s mind.

Hazel frowned at them. “What is he seeing?”

“Giant spiders,” Apate said with glee. “He’s terrified of them!”

“It can stop, Pirithous,” Dolus said, “if you release the gods from their vows.”

The judge crumpled and started to cry. “I release them! You are released, gods! Just…please. No spiders!”

Hazel glanced back across the plaza. The minor gods, along with their army, disappeared like a fog bank burning away in the sun.

Suddenly, Hazel wasn’t sure what to do. They stood around watching Pirithous blubber while their friends slowly gathered around them.

Frank and Savannah were supporting Arielle, who was limping along on her Celestial bronze leg. Yazan, Deion, and Johan walked arm in arm, laughing about house cats. Lavinia and Lucius Silver were dancing the Cotton Eye Joe down the road while Orcus flew reconnaissance above them. Last came Asterion, walking with dignity like a conquering prince, which he was.

Will reached into his pants pockets and pulled out some Kit Kat bars. He passed the first one to Nico. “Eat. Doctor’s orders.”

But he had plenty of extras. By the time all their friends had gathered at the car crash, everyone was munching chocolate and watching Pirithous cry.

The Cocoa Puffs had gathered as well, since they tended to show up whenever food was available. They bounced around everyone’s feet, making puppy-dog eyes and begging for scraps. Defiance sniffed at Pirithous’s shredded robes but apparently decided the judge didn’t smell so good.

“His Honor looks pretty sad,” said Hazel.

“Very,” added Asterion.

“So what do we do with him now?” Nico mused.

“Punish me, of course!” Pirithous screamed. “If you think I’m guilty, it’s what I deserve!”

“Dude,” said Will, “what is with your obsession with punishment? We just wanted to stop your bizarre take-over-the-Underworld scheme. We never wanted to punish you!”

Apate snorted. “Speak for yourself, demigod.”

“I would happily drop him into Tartarus,” Dolus agreed. “There are some lovely big spiders down there.”

Pirithous whimpered and cowered.

“I think you’ve done enough,” said Hazel. “As terrible as Pirithous is, I don’t want to hurt him any more *or* kill him.”

“Yeah,” Deion agreed. “It would be like killing an injured animal. A *nasty* injured animal, but still…”

Hazel glanced up at the helicopter, which continued to circle the park. “There’s also the question of how we conceal what happened here. The mortals got quite a show.”

As soon as she said this, the hair rose on her arms. She felt a cold, heavy presence in the woods, just off the road—something familiar, powerful, and dangerous.

The others must have felt it too. They instinctively backed away. Some readied their weapons, but Hazel raised her hand. “No,” she said. “Wait.”

A woman emerged from the trees. Or rather…*three* women joined at the waist. Her faces ranged from a teenaged girl to a middle-aged woman to a grizzled grandmother. Purple flames haloed her body, flickering across the folds of her midnight-black dress. At her side padded the largest hellhound Hazel had ever seen. On the woman’s shoulder sat a weasel….

No, Hazel realized. Not a weasel. A *polecat.* The goddess’s sacred animal.

“Perhaps,” said the woman, “you should let me take things from here.”

Dolus and Apate bowed their heads and knelt, still floating in the air since they had no feet to stand on. Hazel took a knee as well.

It had been a long time since she’d seen the goddess of magic, but she remembered that voice. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Lady Hecate,” she said. “It’s nice to see you again.”

CHAPTER 39

Nico knelt along with the rest of the group. It seemed like the right thing to do when the goddess of magic was staring at them with her dark, glittering eyes, like an eagle marking its prey.

Next to him, Deion whispered, “Another goddess. And she’s one I’ve actually heard of!”

“Shh!” Savannah elbowed him. “Don’t say that! It’s rude!”

Hecate frowned—taking in the strange assembly of demigods and mythics, the beat-up judge, the crashed Chevy.

“Hazel Levesque,” she said, “what in the name of all the gods have you been doing to the Mist?”

Hazel smiled as if she wasn’t fazed by the flaming Triple Goddess with the scary pets. “It’s a long story, my lady.”

Hecate crossed her arms. “I’m immortal. I have time.”

And so Hazel brought her up to speed. That took a while. Fortunately, Hazel stood up about halfway through, so Nico felt free to do the same. All the kneeling was killing him.

When Hazel finished her story, Hecate sighed. She didn’t look angry so much as exasperated, like, *You crazy kids and your Mist.*

“You demigods have been keeping me very busy as of late,” she said. “I need another vacation.”

Pirithous groveled, clawing his way toward the goddess. “O Great Hecate!” he cried. “Please hear me now! I was only trying to restore order to the world.”

“Oh, I’ve *been* hearing you,” said the goddess. “You and your little group of cronies have caused quite a commotion.” She stopped and looked around. “It appears they’ve all abandoned you now. They were smart.”

Pirithous pressed his face to the pavement, which must have really hurt with that giant chunk of glass in his forehead. “It doesn’t matter! If I got your attention, if I showed the mortal world how chaotic the Underworld is, how much we need change—then I achieved what I needed to.”

“Please don’t listen to him,” said Nico. “He’s caused so much—”

Hecate raised a hand, and the words died in his mouth.

“So, Pirithous,” said the goddess, “do I understand correctly that you wish to put Hades on trial? You wish to stand in judgment of an Olympian?”

The judge glanced up, probably trying to gauge the tone of her voice. If it had been Nico, he would’ve said, *No, there’s been a mistake. I’m good! I’ll just be on my way.*

Instead, Pirithous said, “Yes, my lady! It is my deepest desire. I *know* I can do a better job of ordering the Underworld.”

Apate snorted, but Hecate shot her a look that said *You shut it too.*

“I see,” said Hecate. “You believe you are worthy of this great honor.”

“Yes!” Pirithous cried.

“Just as you would make a more worthy husband for Persephone?”

“I— Yes! Yes, of course! *Finally*, a goddess who understands me!”

“Indeed,” said Hecate. “I understand you.”

Her form shimmered, becoming a single person rather than three—an adult woman in a sleeveless black gown, her dark hair crowned with a silver tiara. Her hellhound and polecat dissolved into shadows, going back to wherever scary supernatural pets came from.

Hecate snapped her fingers. A massive boulder erupted from the middle of the street. It was a chunk of schist roughly shaped like a king-size bed.

“Here is your throne,” Hecate said. “Be seated, new king of the Underworld, and receive your reward!”

Nico glanced at his friends. By now, he realized Hecate had no intention of rewarding Pirithous. Judging from his friends’ faces, they knew it too. The only one who seemed to believe in Pirithous’s well-deserved reward was Pirithous.

“Thank you, great goddess!” He groveled some more, and Nico realized he was a natural at it. Then the disgraced judge crawled to the boulder, which he seemed to think was an actual throne. With a great deal of effort and whimpering, he managed to climb on top of it. He lay back, facing the sky, and began to sink into the stone until his back half was stuck. He had a blissful expression on his face.

“Bring forth the accused,” he muttered dreamily. Then he closed his eyes and started to snore.

Dolus laughed. “So much for him. Great job, Lady Hecate!”

“Silence, Dolus.”

“Yes, Lady Hecate!”

The goddess rolled her eyes. “Well then. I will return our new king of the Underworld to Asphodel, unless anyone would like to keep him.” She paused. “He would make an excellent doorstop, or paperweight.”

“Hold on.” Nico suspected it might not be wise of him to speak up, but he was too exhausted to care. “Are you telling me he’s getting his old punishment, but he *thinks* he’s being rewarded? Is that…? Do *all* punishments and rewards in the Underworld work that way? It’s just a matter of what you believe?”

Hecate’s eyes gleamed mischievously. “I never said that, son of Hades. Nor would I ever give away your father’s trade secrets.”

That wasn’t a no. And it didn’t make Nico feel any better.

“Last call for a Pirithous paperweight?” the goddess said. “No? Very well.”

She snapped her fingers again, and the boulder sank into the earth, taking with it the worst judge ever.

Relief flooded Nico’s body. Unfortunately, his body decided that meant its work was done. His knees buckled.

“Whoa there.” Will grabbed his arm, struggling to keep him upright.

It is time, Nico, said Semele. *I must vacate your mind.*

Hecate focused on him with renewed interest. “Semele? Is that *you*? Get out of that poor boy!”

All the air was sucked out of Nico’s body, and he dropped to the ground. Suddenly, there was so much *space* in his mind, like his thoughts finally had room to swim around in. The Kit Kat bar he’d just eaten threatened to come up, but he managed to swallow back his nausea.

“I’ve got you.” Will’s gentle voice kept him from slipping into unconsciousness. Nico didn’t think he could stand again, but he managed to sit cross-legged, hoping Hecate would excuse his bad manners. At least he didn’t throw up on her.

When his vision cleared, he saw Semele hovering before him. Once again, she was a faint swirl of gray. Immediately, Nico felt a pang of loss. As difficult as it had been, he missed her voice in his mind, her comforting strength. But most of all, he missed seeing her true form as a woman made of smoke and stars.

Hecate regarded the eidolon with a sad smile. “It has been too long, Semele Thyone. When you faded from Olympus, I wondered what had happened to you. But an *eidolon*? That is far below your station.”

“I made the best of it,” said Semele. “I found friends whom I would not trade for all the thrones on Mount Olympus.”

Nico’s head was still spinning. The memories he had absorbed from Semele, tiny glimpses of her past, started to stitch together and form a picture.

“Wait…” His jaw dropped open. “You’re a goddess?”

Apate laughed. “You didn’t *know*? This is Semele Thyone, the goddess of frenzy! The mother—”

“I *was*.” Semele cut her off. “I am no longer.”

“*Another* god?” exclaimed Deion. “That’s four in one day!”

“It’s way more than that,” remarked Hazel as Deion’s eyes widened. “There were tons of them here.”

Hecate approached the eidolon. “I commend your dedication to these demigods and mythics. I know what it is like to be forgotten, shut out of Olympus, and my choices were not as noble as yours.”

Her dark eyes suddenly seemed sad. “I allied myself with Kronos. I thought it was the right thing to do at the time, but now I know it was a decision based on pain and bitterness. I am thankful I had another opportunity to choose differently, much like the opportunity you and these demigods have given the mythics.”

She ran her fingers through the wisps of smoke as if caressing Semele’s hair. “It seems only fair that you have another chance as well. If you would allow me…You have been incorporeal for too long.”

Semele’s smoky form churned and twisted. “I— Would Olympus allow it?”

Hecate chuckled. “Olympus doesn’t know what it is doing most of the time. And I have missed you.”

Her hand flared with purple fire.

Nico watched in shock as the smoke thickened, solidifying into a beautiful woman in a long blue gown and a black shawl, her brown hair pulled up in intricate braids. It was the same face he’d seen in the fireworks, now made of flesh.

Semele ran her hands down the front of her gown. “I am myself once again!”

“You are,” said Hecate. “You have earned it.”

Semele threw her arms around Hecate.

The goddess of magic laughed. Then she whispered something in Semele’s ear.

Semele pulled away, her eyes filled with tears. “Yes. Yes, I will go see him now.” She turned to Nico. “Thank you for allowing me to share your mind. It is a beautiful place.” Then she faced Asterion. “And you, you gorgeous cow. I can properly hug you.”

She tackled the bull-man around the waist, much to his surprise.

“I will be back,” she promised. “But first…I have someone to see.”

Semele dissolved in a frenzy of golden glitter.

“Well then!” said Hecate. “Dolus and Apate, it’s your turn.”

The twin gods flinched.

“Look, about the house cat thing…” Dolus said. “We may have gotten carried away….”

Hecate laughed. “I am not upset. The Ferris wheel illusion was particularly nice. In fact, I was impressed by your contributions today.”

“You were?” Apate said. “I mean, yes, of course! Thank you!”

Hecate smiled at Nico and Will. “It has given me great pride to know that Camp Half-Blood has honored me with a cabin. I imagine they would be happy to do the same for our twin deceivers, yes?”

A terrifying image flashed through Nico’s mind of Dolus and Apate campers at Camp Half-Blood—the trickery, the guile, the epic toilet-paper fights with the Hermes cabin.

“We’d be happy to arrange that,” he said. He hoped he sounded honest, or at least properly deceitful.

The goddess’s gaze moved to Hazel. “And you and I, Hazel Levesque—our history is deeply intertwined. We have fought together, and I have great respect for you.”

“Thank you,” said Hazel. “The feeling is very mutual.”

“I imagine you will ensure that shrines are constructed on Temple Hill for our trickster friends?”

Hazel grinned at Frank, and then saluted the goddess. “We’ll see to it right away.”

Apate’s face turned red. “You honor us, Hecate! You know, we were just about to do a Mist volcano, if you’d like to see it—”

“You may leave us now,” Hecate said.

The twin gods gulped. Then, because they knew an exit cue when they heard one, they vanished in a cloud of rhinestones and flowers.

Will exhaled in relief. “Thank you, Lady Hecate. I think I’ve had enough guile and trickery for one day. But, uh, speaking of that…” He glanced up at the news helicopter. “What about all the humans who saw everything?”

“Oh, them.” Hecate waved her hand dismissively. The helicopter veered away and flew off toward downtown San Francisco. The mortal bystanders who were still in the park lowered their phones, looked momentarily stunned, and then wandered off in different directions.

“Mortal minds are easy to manipulate,” said Hecate. “They’ll have a dozen different explanations for what they saw today, and none of them will be correct. In the end, as always, they’ll believe only what they want to believe.”

“What if they want to believe they saw a bunch of mythics fighting a bunch of gods?” Will asked, his eyes wide.

“That is their prerogative,” she answered, grinning.

Nico took Will’s hand. “So it’s over? We can relax?”

Hecate smirked. “Well, I’m not sure demigods can ever relax, Nico di Angelo. But you’ve done quite enough for now. You have helped usher in a new world! First by defeating Kronos, then Gaea, and then by rescuing a Titan from Tartarus. Now you’ve befriended mythics who thought they only had one choice in life. You are helping them choose to be something else, if they wish.”

“She is right,” said Asterion, beaming with pride. “I do not know if we would still be alive if it were not for your kindness, friends.”

Quinoa fluttered over to Hazel and hugged her around the neck. “You make me want to be a better pseudo-grain!”

Hazel laughed. “Thank you, Quinoa. I know a group of kindergartners who will be really happy to see you again.”

“Excellent.” Hecate nodded in satisfaction. “You younger demigods, behave yourselves. And try to learn from the example of your elders.” She pointed at Nico.

“Um,” he said, “I’m only a few years older than—”

“Elders,” Hecate repeated, a bit more forcefully.

Nico decided not to fight it. “Thank you, Hecate. For helping us.”

The goddess smiled, and then faded into shadow.

Nico gazed at the others around him. What a strange group they were—deadly monsters turned allies; Greek and Roman demigods working side by side; clueless kids like Nico suddenly being called “elders,” charged with teaching newer recruits how to survive in the world.

“What a day,” Will marveled. “I’m gonna be honest…I don’t think we’ve ever been through anything quite this wild.”

“Eight gods,” said Deion. “We got to meet *eight* gods, you guys!”

“He’s such a baby,” Savannah said to Arielle. “He’ll grow out of it, though.”

Arielle snickered, looping her arm through Savannah’s like they’d been best friends forever. The empousa glanced at Nico. *Thank you*, she mouthed.

“Let’s get home,” said Nico. “I mean to Camp Jupiter…if someone would help me up.”

Will pulled him to his feet, and then kissed the back of his hand. “You know I got you.”

“We all do,” said Hazel.

Nico didn’t remember much about the trip back. Hazel released Arion so she could take the BART with everyone else. Surrounded by his friends and family, Nico closed his eyes as they rode under the bay. He allowed himself to pass out, knowing he was with people who would watch over him, and treat him as he deserved.

CHAPTER 40

When Nico awoke the next day in the guest barracks, he found Will sitting on the floor up against his bunk, playing with Fear as if it were nothing more than a pet.

Nico rubbed his eyes. “You know that’s a cacodemon and not a house cat, right?”

Will twisted around to smile at him. “Welcome back to the world of the conscious, sleepyhead.”

Nico reached out and ran his fingers through Will’s curls. “It’s nice to be back.”

“You slept for like thirteen hours. I thought you *died*.”

Nico yawned and sat up. “I think the whole eidolon-possession thing did a number on me.”

Nico heard a soft yawn, and Defiance poked its head out from under the covers. It was followed by the rest of the Cocoa Puffs, who began to yap and beg for food.

“I agree, Puffs,” said Nico. “I’m hungry, too.”

“Well, you’re in luck, then,” said Will. “Our farewell dinner should be just about ready.”

The word *dinner* made him excited. The word *farewell* made him incredibly sad.

Already? he thought.

But he managed to get up and make himself presentable. Then he followed Will out of the barracks. The sunset was spectacular over the Berkeley Hills. In the distance, New Rome glittered like a dragon’s treasure hoard. The Via Principalis had been transformed into a huge picnic area with white cloths, fresh flowers, and loads and loads of savory food on the tables.

As soon as Nico emerged from the barracks, the entire legion cheered, whooping and hollering in a clear breach of military discipline. Their praetors, Hazel and Frank, cheered right along with them, raising glasses of fruit punch in Nico’s honor.

Nico blinked back tears. Only days ago, he’d felt so uncomfortable, so frustrated, so unsure he would ever get on the legion’s good side. And now…he had several hundred new best friends, including the mythics, who sat shoulder to shoulder with their demigod hosts, enjoying the party along with everyone else.

Nico loved that he could still be surprised by his world.

After what felt like a million hugs, handshakes, pats on the back, and good-natured jokes, Nico and Will settled in to eat across from Hazel and Frank, with their friends from the Battle of Golden Gate Park all around them.

Nico inhaled a brisket sandwich, followed by a Cyclops-size serving of potato salad, before he paid much attention to the conversation around him.

". . . all happened so *fast*," Will was saying. "In some ways, I feel like I've been at Camp Jupiter forever. But in other ways, I feel like I just got here. I kind of don't want to leave."

Frank cupped his hand to his ear. "I'm sorry—could you repeat that? You're not anxious to get back to the 'clearly superior camp'?"

Will threw a biscuit at him, and everyone laughed.

"We *do* need to get back home, though," said Will. He turned to Nico. "I talked with Chiron not long ago. The campers miss us, and they need some help with winter training. Also, he wants a tessera. *Much* easier to do Iris-messages with them."

"Sorry," Hazel said. "I'm afraid that's proprietary Roman technology."

More biscuits flew across the table.

Savannah grinned. "I will visit you at Camp Half-Blood someday. And I'll teach your Hephaestus cabin people how to make tesserae. If my praetors will allow it."

"Hmm," Frank said. "We'll think about it."

"I'm gonna miss you guys!" said Yazan. "Will you come back soon?"

"Dude, they haven't even *left* yet," said Deion. "Besides, we have our own quest to train for, remember?"

Nico frowned. "Another quest, already?"

"It's still kind of unofficial," said Hazel. "They'll have to visit Temple Hill, get a good omen from the augurs, et cetera, but…Do you wanna explain, Sav?"

Savannah took Arielle's hand. "My friend here had an idea. About how to help me."

Arielle grinned, showing her fangs. "I thought it might help Savannah if we went out to find the empousai who took her family from her. Give them a good talking-to. Get some closure, if we can."

Nico guessed that *good talking-to* was a euphemism for *stomp them with extreme prejudice*. He also felt a twinge of worry at the idea of Yazan, Deion, and Savannah heading out on a quest, even with Arielle's help. They were so young, so untested.

Then he realized he was thinking very much like an elder, like Chiron or Mr. D. Also, his friends were no longer untested. They'd proven themselves true heroes over the past week.

"That's amazing," he said. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Yes, Dad," said Yazan. "And thank you. For being so nice to us."

"Dude, we should go to Temple Hill right now!" said Deion. "I've got a teddy bear we can sacrifice!"

And off they ran. Those crazy kids and their sacrificial stuffed animals.

Savannah, however, lingered for a moment.

"You changed my life," she told Nico quietly. "I won't forget that."

He held his arms open, and she came in for a long hug. "I'll come back to visit," he said. "I promise."

She left Nico with more tears in his eyes.

"She's right," said Hazel. "You've changed *all* our lives, Nico."

There was more crying, more hugging, more throwing of biscuits. Nico wasn't sure when he'd had a better dinner. Eventually, though, the sky darkened, and the wind spirits started clearing the tables. Slowly, the five cohorts drifted off to take care of their evening chores. Lavinia Asimov stopped by to give them one last hug and warned them that when they came back, she was going to expect them to be *much* better at square dancing.

Finally, Hazel and Frank escorted them to the main gates of the camp, followed by the mythics and a bouncing herd of Cocoa Puffs. They stood together, gazing out over the valley as the last light of day painted the fields a deep magenta.

Asterion placed a large hand on Nico's shoulders. "Do not be sad, my friends. This is only a temporary good-bye. Also, I made you going-away presents."

He presented Will and Nico with matching knit caps—bright pink, with kitties and puppies stitched in blue and green.

"We'll wear them proudly into battle," Will promised. "Come here, you beautiful cow!"

Asterion explained that the mythics would be forming an auxilia, a special cohort of mythics who would be attached to the legion. Their temporary quarters on the Field of Mars would become a permanent home.

“We’ll keep cultivating that patch of Tartarus,” Quinoa said. “I’ll figure out the right blend of fertilizer yet! Maybe the kindergartners can help me!”

Nico suppressed a shudder. The idea of small children tilling the primordial flesh of a nightmarish god seemed a little risky, but then again, these were the children of demigods, so what did he know?

“I’m going to keep working in the archives!” said Johan. “Lucius Silver and I went back to the park while you were asleep. He helped me retrieve those dodecahedrons so they don’t fall into the wrong hands. Lucius is actually very nice. He doesn’t know much about tea, though. We’ll work on that.”

Frank laughed. “I’m just grateful to have help on the administrative side. I never realized how behind we were on filing and organization.”

Nico turned to Orcus, who had been waddling along with them, not saying much.

“What about you?” Nico asked. “More aerial reconnaissance?”

The tiny griffin ruffled his black-and-white wings. “Actually, no. I’ll be leaving soon.”

“Leaving?” Will looked shocked. “But…why?”

Orcus puffed up his chest. “I have to find my own place in the world. I’m thankful for the weeks I spent here, and I’m sure I’ll come back to visit, but the last time I was out of Tartarus, I spent my life in a cage. Now I know there’s a whole wide world to explore! I need to experience it, even if it means occasionally dealing with highways and cars.”

Nico blinked back tears yet again. He felt so proud of the little griffin, who’d shivered so helplessly in his arms just a few days ago. “The world isn’t ready, Orcus. You’re going to take it by storm.”

“I know,” he agreed. “I am small, but I am powerful.”

He didn’t even fart when he said it.

Nico scanned the whole group. He wasn’t ready to leave them.

“I’m just sorry I couldn’t say good-bye to Semele,” he said.

Frank grinned. “Oh, I imagine you’ll cross paths again.”

It sounded like Frank knew more than he was saying, but Nico let it go. As long as it was good news, he could wait. He was starting not to hate surprises as much as he once did.

There was one last round of hugs, and Nico embraced Hazel the longest. “I am so proud of you.”

“Hey, that’s my line.” She laughed. “Thank you for everything. You sure you’re up for shadow-travel?”

“Just me, Will, and the Cocoa Puffs? After what we’ve done this week, that’ll be a piece of cake. Love you.”

“You too. Come back soon.”

The Cocoa Puffs gathered around. Will took Nico’s hand. Then, before he could change his mind, Nico stepped into the shadows.

A moment later, they were standing in a fallow strawberry patch, staring up at the sky-blue Big House framed by a starry night sky. The wind was blustery, much colder than in California. It smelled like snow, but Nico was glad for the chill. As he gazed around at the bare trees, he felt his whole body relax.

He was home.

His Puffs seemed just as overjoyed. They squeaked and bounced and then scampered off toward the cabins, probably to find food or some demigods to terrorize.

“Well, well!” Chiron called from the front porch. He sat in his wheelchair under a fuzzy blanket and holding a steaming cup of tea, which made Nico immediately nostalgic for Johan. “Welcome back, Nico and Will.” He smiled warmly. “We’ve just been hearing all about your adventures.”

Nico blinked. “You—what?”

The front door of the Big House crashed open, and Mr. D walked out mid-laugh, apparently talking to someone behind him. “Oh, come on. Cheez Whiz is *wonderful* with cocktail weenies!”

He stopped short when he saw the demigods. He was wearing one of his garish leopard-print button-downs with neon-pink flannel pajama bottoms and a lime-green terry-cloth bathrobe, like all the fashionable wine gods were wearing this season.

“My favorite troublemakers are back!” He grinned, some sort of liquid sloshing out of the chalice he carried. “My gods, those are fantastic hats! Look at the stitchwork! Tell me, Nico, where do you stand on cocktail weenies with Cheez Whiz?”

Someone else pushed through the doorway, jostling Dionysus out of the way. It was a woman in a lovely blue dress, her brown hair done up in elaborate ringlets. Her expression was one of complete and utter joy.

Nico felt a moment of vertigo. “Semele?”

The former eidolon laughed. “Hello, my dear friends! As you can see, I found him.”

She threw an arm around Dionysus and kissed his cheek, which was, by far, the strangest thing Nico had seen all week.

“Um…” Will seemed to have forgotten how to speak. “H-him?”

“That’s right,” said Dionysus proudly. “Nico, Will…I’d like to introduce you to my mother.”

CHAPTER 41

They sat together on the porch for nearly a quarter of an hour, watching Chiron, Semele, and Dionysus play pinochle and chat like old friends, before Nico finally found his voice.

"Your *mother*?"

Mr. D smiled. "Oh, Nico…you sweet, ignorant child. Of course Semele is my mother! Have you not heard the stories?"

"But…" Will pressed his fingers against his temples, as if to keep his brain from exploding. "*That* Semele in the myths…Sorry. But didn't she *die*?"

Mr. D's expression darkened. "Indeed, Will Solace. Tricked by Hera into demanding that Zeus, my father, show himself in his true form. She…she was consumed by flames, while I was still in her womb!" He put his fist to his mouth and burst into tears.

"There, there, my son." Semele squeezed his shoulder. She glanced at Nico and Will. "He has always been an emotional one. He gets that from me."

Mr. D brushed away his tears. "You'd better forget you ever saw me like this," he warned the demigods. "None of it ever happened!"

"Of course," Nico said. Then he winked at Will.

"I saw that!" Mr. D cried. "Don't make me smite you, di Angelo!"

"Now, now, dear," said Semele. "All is well. Nico and Will restored me to you! They deserve our gratitude."

"Hmph," said the god. "For your sake, I won't smite them, then." He took a shaky breath. "But *only* for your sake."

Nico was fairly sure Mr. D was just being melodramatic, but he did his best to keep a straight face. He turned to Semele.

"So after you burned up…" he said, "you got better?"

Semele spread her hands like, *Ta-da!*

“Thankfully, Zeus saved Dionysus from my womb,” she said, “and eventually made him a god. As for me, Zeus made me a goddess—Semele Thyone, the patron of wild, frenzied parties. It wasn’t really my…scene, I guess you would say, but at least it allowed me to be part of my son’s life.”

“And I adored it!” Mr. D cried. “But then, centuries ago, you simply disappeared. I was *heartbroken*.”

Semele patted his hand. “I know, my dear. It was not intentional, but I am so sorry. When gods are forgotten…they begin to fade. I fear I faded before I could ever say good-bye.”

“An eidolon.” Mr. D shook his head in disbelief. “I still blame Hera for this, you know. She must be responsible. Next time I see her…”

Chiron cleared his throat. “But, Mr. D, all is well now! We should focus on the present, as you always say. Semele has returned!”

“That’s right,” agreed the goddess. “And I learned a great deal during my struggles. I would not erase all that I’ve gained, all the friends I’ve made. Especially these two.” She smiled warmly at the demigods. “They were instrumental in my return. And not just because of this last adventure. Their defeat of Gaea allowed me to begin to choose something different.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose so,” Dionysus said, his voice shaking. “At least you came back to me.” He broke into sobs once more, which sounded like a seal barking.

“There, there,” said Semele, her own eyes red. “Have an hors d’oeuvre.” She offered him a cocktail weenie from the platter on the table.

“I—I suppose I owe Hecate a thank-you,” Mr. D sniffled. “She actually showed up to help. That’s quite a development.”

“It seems even the gods have changed from the days when I knew them,” Semele said.

“Well,” said Chiron, tilting his head toward Nico and Will. “I think the boys and I should leave you two here to have some time alone.” He wheeled himself to the far end of the porch and started unfolding his magical chair, climbing out into his full centaur form.

Mr. D raised a finger of warning at Nico. “Remember, don’t breathe a word to anyone about this. I will drown you in the Long Island Sound if you do.”

“Dionysus, *please*,” said Semele. “Manners!”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll only feed them to Peleus.”

“We won’t say anything!” said Nico. “I promise.”

Chiron escorted them down the path to the cabins. A single Puff hopped out of the woods and rolled along at Nico's heels. It was Sadness, as if it had felt the emotional turmoil in Nico's chest. He was thinking about his own mother, and Bianca, and their brief time in the Underworld. He was happy for Dionysus, but he yearned for his own lost family.

He knew this was a perfectly normal feeling, with or without the Puffs. He would always remember his mother with a mixture of fondness and sadness. The holes left behind by everyone he'd lost over the years hadn't gotten any smaller. But he'd finally learned how to live with that. What would Dionysus say, once he stopped crying and talking about Cheez Whiz? Probably *Be present in the moment.*

Nico tried. It helped to lace his fingers with Will's.

Once they were far out of earshot, Chiron broke the silence. "In all the years I've known Dionysus, I've never seen him like that."

"He might be a god," said Will, "but I don't think he's all that different from the rest of us."

"You know, Chiron," said Nico, "Will had a family reunion of his own on this trip."

The sadness in Nico's heart faded as he listened to Will excitedly explain how Naomi had come to be an unexpected part of their rescue mission.

I feel happy, Nico realized, *not envious*.

Despite all the troubles and close calls, he was glad that he'd gotten to go on this whole strange journey with Will, and happy that Will's mother was a part of his life. *Both of our lives.*

"Your mother sounds absolutely lovely, Will," said Chiron. "I'm thrilled your relationship with her is so strong."

"What was *your* mother like?" Will asked. "I don't think you've ever talked about her."

Chiron sighed. "Philyra. I'm afraid it's not a very happy story."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

Chiron's eyes crinkled. "Quite all right, my boy. You didn't mean ill by it. Perhaps we'll speak of it someday, but not now."

Will squeezed Nico's hand and cast him a sidelong glance, as if to signal *Juicy gossip!*

"You boys had quite the trip," said Chiron. "And it is certainly interesting to see how your past heroism has affected so many. Pirithous, of all people! I remember him when he was mortal. Insufferable."

“He *sucked*, Chiron,” Nico said vehemently. “It’s still hard for me to wrap my mind around his justification for what he did.”

“Well, look at Dionysus,” said Chiron. “He’s here at camp because the gods couldn’t imagine a solution without some form of punishment. What you two did for Camp Jupiter, for the mythics, for your friend Savannah…You imagined a new path. A more hopeful one. I think both of you are very good at that.”

Nico felt the heat rising in his face. He still wasn’t so great at accepting compliments. “It reminded me of Nyx and Bob. She *hated* that he changed.”

“And she hated that *you* changed,” added Will. “Your Cocoa Puffs…they were supposed to torment you, remember?”

Chiron chuckled. “She thought that your worst memories and thoughts would incapacitate you, but from what I hear, even your cacodemons are adapting.”

“Yeah,” said Nico. “Still figuring that out, but I’m realizing that even if they represent my darkest moments, they can teach me something important.”

“Listen to you, Nico,” said Chiron, smiling. “I remember when you first came here. You have changed so much. I am proud of you.”

“Don’t you get all sappy on me now,” said Nico. “Mr. D was bad enough. I don’t know that I could handle it from *both* of you.”

“Accept the love!” said Will. “Because it’s not stopping anytime soon.”

When they arrived at the cabins, Nico slowed. He saw a familiar group sitting and chatting by the firepit.

Oludare spotted Nico first and waved at him excitedly. “Hey, look who it is! You’re back!”

Olu, Ananya, and Noah rushed toward them. Nico was stunned by how much more comfortable and at home they looked, even bundled up in their winter jackets. Had it only been a few days ago that they’d sat together in the dining hall?

“You have to tell us *everything*,” said Ananya.

“And we have so much to tell *you*!” Noah said. He stepped closer and then lowered his voice. “Did you know that Mr. D is actually a *wine god*, but he’s not allowed to drink wine?”

Will stifled a laugh. “Oh, really? Wow.”

Chiron cleared his throat. “All right, campers. It’s past curfew. And these counselors have *just* returned to camp, so please allow them to get some food and rest.”

“We’ll come find you tomorrow,” Nico promised the trio, “and tell you all about our trip.”

They rushed off excitedly, and Nico smiled. He was looking forward to teaching these kids about the world.

The dining hall was empty this late at night, but one of the dryads had apparently gotten word they were back. They’d set two places at the head table, with plates of Nico’s and Will’s favorite desserts. They’d just eaten at Camp Jupiter, but Nico never turned down chocolate chip cookies.

“I guess we settle back into our routines now,” he said as they dug in. “Feels kinda weird.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “Like…a couple of days ago, we were sneaking into a real courthouse to find a *fake* courthouse. And that was the *least* strange part.”

“That’s the hero’s life,” said Chiron. “I’ve been here at Camp Half-Blood for what seems like forever, but I’ve also been all over the world, you know. I’ve seen things that you couldn’t dream of.”

“Do you ever miss traveling?” Nico asked.

Chiron paused to think. “To be honest, I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it in quite some time.”

“Maybe you need a vacation,” suggested Will. “If Hecate can take one, why can’t you?”

The old centaur laughed. “Perhaps. But it’s my duty to look after the new demigods who arrive year after year, and I enjoy it.” He raised his eyebrows. “Unless you are volunteering to become the new activities directors.”

Nico and Will traded a look but remained silent.

“Then eat up, boys. I should get back to the Big House before Dionysus finishes all the hors d’oeuvres.”

Once they were alone, Will leaned his shoulder against Nico’s. “It’s good to be back.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Well, that, and also how much I missed the food here.”

“Way better than Camp Jupiter.”

“In almost every way.”

As the Puffs circled their feet, begging for treats, Nico set aside a few of the tastiest-looking cookies for something else.

“I haven’t always been the best with burnt offerings,” he admitted. “But after what we just went through, I kinda don’t want to forget about the gods. Even Apate and Dolus.”

“Even Laverna and the di inferi?” Will asked.

“Let’s not go overboard.”

Will laughed.

As Nico ate, he was aware of Will staring at him. His eyes were like those of a Mist-created puppy dog.

“What?” Nico asked.

“I know you didn’t want any more sappiness, but—”

Nico groaned. “Not you, too!”

“You’re my boyfriend! You already signed up for this!”

“I did.” He set down his cookie and reached for Will’s hand. “All right, you have thirty seconds.”

“It won’t take thirty seconds,” Will promised. “I just want to say that I’m proud of you too. I don’t think you realize how much you’ve changed in the last year. If Past Nico had gone through what we just did, he would have responded differently. *Very* differently.”

“You think so?” Nico said. “I don’t know that I’ve changed *that* much.”

“Nico, look at your life!” Will’s smile lit up his face. “When we first became boyfriends, you were so uncertain about the future. You doubted yourself more than you believed in yourself. Now you’ve got younger demigods looking up to you, and you just helped your sister avoid a catastrophe across the country.”

“You helped too,” he said.

“But we’re talking about *you*. No distracting me from the sappiness!”

“It’s been over thirty seconds!”

Will laughed. “I just wanted to say that I don’t think I’ve ever felt happier, Nico. And I know it’s because of you.”

Nico wrinkled his nose. “All right, I accept it,” he said, and then he leaned forward and met his boyfriend’s lips with his own. “I’m happy, too. Happier than I’ve ever been.”

Loneliness howled at Nico from under the table. He thought it was because the creature was still hungry, but the cacodemon hopped up onto the seat next to him and climbed into his lap.

Nico saw images from his past: *Watching the campers from afar. Trapped in the jar. Wandering the forest at night.*

But Loneliness also showed him what had happened when he pushed through the loneliest moments: *Jason convincing Nico to stay in camp. Visiting Hazel for the first time. Cuddling with Will in Damasen's hut.*

For every sad memory, there was a hopeful one that counterbalanced it. Nico hadn't realized it before, especially since the negative memories were so powerful. But Nico had finally found his home, his family, and his love.

He was happy being in this very place at this very moment in time. So Nico settled into the present, and he allowed it to embrace him.

Like a new friend.

GLOSSARY

Acropolis a citadel on a rocky outcrop high above the city of Athens; the Parthenon was located there

aeterna (aeternae, pl.) a giant that stands on two legs, is covered in shaggy fur, and has a crested, bone-covered head

Alcyoneus Gaea's oldest giant son

Aletheia Greek goddess of honesty; Roman form: Veritas, god of truth

ambrosia the food eaten by the gods, usually presented in small cubes; demigods eat it to heal their injuries and regain strength

Apate daimona of deceit, deception, guile, and fraud; male counterpart: Dolus, daimon of trickery

Apollo the Greek god of the sun, light, healing, disease, plague, music, art, poetry, archery, reason, knowledge, truth, and prophecy. He is the son of Zeus and the twin brother of the goddess Artemis. Zeus once punished Apollo by stripping him of his godly powers and sending him to earth in the form of a mortal teenager named Lester Papadopoulos. To regain his place in Mount Olympus, Apollo had to go on a quest to restore the Oracles and face his archenemy Python (see the Trials of Apollo series).

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena; Roman form: Mars

Argo II the fantastical ship built by the demigod Leo Valdez, which can both sail and fly and has Festus the bronze dragon as a figurehead. The ship was named after the *Argo*, the vessel used by a band of Greek heroes who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece (see the Heroes of Olympus series).

Argus a one-hundred-eyed giant who is the head of security at Camp Half-Blood

Arion the immortal equine son of the gods Demeter and Poseidon

Astraea a minor Greek goddess of justice and innocence

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom; Roman form: Minerva

attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) a syndrome characterized by high levels of inattention, distractibility, impulsivity, restlessness, hyperactivity, and hypersensitivity. For demigods, ADHD is a sign of their heightened senses and natural aptitude for battle.

aura (aurae, pl.) wind nymph

auxilia noncitizen troops attached to a Roman legion

Bacchus the Roman god of wine and revelry; Greek form: Dionysus

ballista (ballistae, pl.) a missile weapon that hurls stones or bolts at the enemy

bident a two-pointed spear; a symbol of Hades

Big House a large sky-blue house that serves as the main administrative building at Camp Half-Blood

blemmyae a tribe of headless people with faces in their chests

cabezudos costumed figures with oversize heads; they represent characters from Puerto Rican folklore and are used in public processions

cacodemons Nyx's personifications of negative emotions and feelings

caldarium a room in a Roman bath with a hot plunge pool

Caldecott Tunnel a four-lane highway tunnel cutting through the Berkeley Hills that connects Oakland and Orinda, two cities in California. It also serves as an entrance to Camp Jupiter.

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located on Long Island, New York (see the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series)

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located between the Oakland Hills and Berkeley Hills, in California

Carthaginian a citizen of Carthage, an ancient city-state in northern Africa; Rome's biggest rival

ce la farai Italian for *You will make it. You will manage. You will be able to handle it.*

Celestial bronze an ore mined by Cyclopes and shaped by tempering the metal in Mount Etna and cooling it in the River Lethe. The metal is harmless to mortals but deadly to creatures of the magical world.

centaur a race of creatures that is half human, half horse

centurion an officer of the Roman army

charmspeak a blessing bestowed by Aphrodite on her children that enables them to persuade others with their voices

Che cosa stai faccendo? Italian for *You packed your figurines?*

Chiron the immortal centaur who is the activities director at Camp Half-Blood

Circus Maximus a long, oval horse-racing arena

cohort a Roman military unit

Colchis bull a mechanical bull created by the god Hephaestus and given to King Aeetes as a gift. It was made of bronze, with silver horns and rubies for eyes.

colosseum an elliptical amphitheater

cuirass armor made to fit the wearer's torso

Cyclops (Cyclopes, pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of their forehead

cynocephalus (cynocephali, pl.) a dog-headed man

Daemones Ceramici five malevolent spirits who plague potters: the smasher, the crasher, the charrer, the destroyer, and crudebake

daimon an immortal spirit that can be good, evil, or neutral and sits between gods and mortals in terms of power

Damasen the giant son of Tartarus and Gaea; created to oppose Ares; condemned to Tartarus for slaying a drakon that was ravaging the land

Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) a two-day holiday that reunites the living and dead. Families create ofrendas (offerings) to honor relatives who have passed. El Catrin and La Catrina are male and female characters who have become popular costumes, featuring white skull faces.

Decumanian Gate the rear entrance to Camp Jupiter

demigod the offspring of a god and a mortal

di inferi ancient gods of the underworld: Dis, Februus, and Mors, the personification of Death

Dionysus the Greek god of wine and revelry; a son of Zeus; Roman form: Bacchus

dodecahedron a twelve-sided hollow copper object designed to ensnare any mythical creature, or anyone with godly parentage, when one finger each covers the holes on ten plates and the remaining two plates are pointed at the victim

Dolus daimon of trickery; female counterpart: Apate

Doors of Death the doorway to the House of Hades, located in Tartarus. The Doors have two sides—one in the mortal world and one in the Underworld.

dracaena a female reptilian creature, often with some human features

drachma the silver coin of ancient Greece

drakon a gigantic yellow-and-green serpentlike monster with frills around its neck, reptilian eyes, and huge talons; it spits poison

dryad tree nymph

eidolon a possessing spirit

Elysium the section of the Underworld where those who are blessed by the gods are sent to rest in eternal peace after death

empousa (**empousai**, pl.) a vampire with fangs, claws, a bronze left leg, a donkey right leg, hair made of fire, and skin as white as bone. They have the ability to manipulate the Mist, change shape, and charmspeak in order to attract their mortal victims.

Epiales the personification of nightmares; child of Nyx

Erebos Hades's kingdom in the Underworld

Etruscan relating to the people of Etruria; the Etruscan civilization was an important influence on the Romans, who subdued it by the end of the third century BCE

Fates, the (also known as the Moirai) the three divine personifications of destiny: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. They control the metaphorical thread of life for every living thing from birth to death. Roman forms: the Parcae or Fata.

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man

Field of Mars the battle-training area at Camp Jupiter

Fields of Asphodel the section of the Underworld where people who lived neither a good nor a bad life are sent after death

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where people who were evil during their lives are sent after death to face eternal punishment for their crimes

Forum, the a gathering spot and marketplace for Roman demigods and legacies in New Rome

frigidarium a room in a Roman bath with a cold plunge pool

fritoe Italian fried donut balls

Fufluns a god of plant life, joy, wine, health, and growth in the religion of the Etruscans

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters

gladius a short sword

Golden Fleece the fleece of Chrysomallus, a flying ram sired by Poseidon, that has powerful healing abilities. The fleece currently resides at Camp Half-Blood on Thalia's pine tree to help strengthen the borders. It is guarded by the dragon Peleus.

gorgon each of three sisters—Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa—with snakes for hair and the power to turn anyone who looked at her into stone

graecus Latin for *Greek; enemy; outsider*

griffin a winged creature with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; Roman form: Pluto

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister; Roman form: Juno

Hermes the Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication; Roman form: Mercury

Hestia the Greek goddess of the hearth and home

House of Hades a place in the Underworld where Hades, the Greek god of death, and his wife, Persephone, rule over the souls of the departed

Hypnos the Greek god of sleep; son of Nyx

Iapetus one of the twelve Titans; lord of the west; his name means *the Piercer*. When Percy Jackson fought him in Hades's realm, Iapetus fell into the River Lethe and lost his memory; Percy renamed him Bob.

impellite Latin for *strike*

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters

ichor the golden blood of immortals

Iris the rainbow goddess

Iris-message a form of video communication used by gods and demigods that transmits via a rainbow. The service is managed by Iris, the Greek goddess of the rainbow.

Juno the Roman goddess of marriage; Jupiter's wife and sister; Greek form: Hera

Jupiter Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest); Greek form: Zeus

Juventas the Roman goddess of youth and regeneration; Greek form: Hebe

karpos (karpoi, pl.) grain spirit

katoblep (katoblepones, pl.) a monstrous cow whose name means *down-looker*. It has the body of a buffalo atop squat legs like those of an elephant. Its head resembles a warthog's with large and deadly bloodshot eyes.

Kronos the youngest of the twelve Titans; the son of Ouranos and Gaea; the father of Zeus. He killed his father at his mother's bidding. Titan lord of fate, harvest, justice, and time.

La Befana a witchlike old woman who, according to Italian folklore, delivers gifts to children on the eve of Epiphany

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur (part man, part bull)

Laistrygonian giants eight-foot-tall cannibal giants with heavily tattooed arms

Lar (**Lares**, pl.) house god, ancestral spirit

Laverna Roman goddess of thieves, cheats, and liars

legion the major unit of the Roman army, consisting of infantry and cavalry troops

legionnaire a member of a legion

Lernaean Hydra a gigantic, nine-headed serpent that haunted the swamps of Lerna. Hercules was sent to kill it, and every time he cut off one of the heads, two more would grow out of the stump.

Little Tiber the barrier of Camp Jupiter

Lotus Hotel and Casino an establishment in Las Vegas, Nevada, where guests lose track of time and never age; Hades stashed Nico and his sister Bianca there before World War II and they stayed for a few decades

Lupa the wolf goddess who finds Roman demigods and leads them to Camp Jupiter

manticore a creature with a human head, a lion's body, and a scorpion's tail

manubalista a heavy and powerful two-handed crossbow

Mars the Roman god of war; Greek form: Ares

Mary Tudor the first queen to rule England. She became known as “Bloody Mary” for her persecution of Protestants in a vain attempt to bring back Catholic jurisdiction.

Mercury the Roman god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication; Greek form: Hermes

Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom, poetry, medicine, commerce, weaving, and crafts; patron of ceramic arts; Greek form: Athena

Minos king of Crete; son of Zeus; every year he made King Aegeus pick seven boys and seven girls to be sent to the Labyrinth, where they would be eaten by the Minotaur. After his death, he became a judge in the Underworld.

Minotaur a mythic named Asterion with the head of a bull and the body of a man

Mist a magical force that disguises things from mortals

Muses nine goddesses who preside over inspiration, the sciences, the arts, poetry, and literature

Mount Olympus the home of the Greek gods and goddesses; used to be at the top of a mountain in Greece and gradually moved west. It is currently hovering above the Empire State building in New York City.

Mythomagic a card and figurine game based on Greek mythology

naiad a nymph who presides over a body of fresh water

nectar the drink of the gods; like ambrosia, demigods consume it to heal their injuries and regain strength

Neptune the Roman god of the sea; Greek form: Poseidon

Nero one of the evilest emperors in Roman history, infamous for being malevolent, ruthless, and bloodthirsty

New Rome University a college in a community near Camp Jupiter where demigods can study in peace, without interference from mortals or monsters

non inimicos licet Latin for *no enemies allowed*

nymph a female deity who animates nature

Nyx the Greek goddess of night; one of the ancient, firstborn elemental gods

orbem instruite Latin for *form a circle*

palla an elegant cloak wrapped around the body and fastened by brooches; women in ancient Rome wore them when they went outside the house

parati Latin for *ready*

Pasiphaë an immortal sorceress and a mistress of magical herbal arts. Due to her husband Minos's blasphemy, she was cursed by Poseidon to fall in love with his prize bull and give birth to the Minotaur.

pasticceria Italian for *pastry shop*

Peleus the dragon that protects the Golden Fleece on the border of Camp Half-Blood

Persephone the Greek queen of the Underworld; wife of Hades; daughter of Zeus and Demeter

Pila tollite! Ad pila portate! Latin for *Ready javelins! Advance to javelin!*

Pirithous a demigod son of Zeus and a contemporary of Theseus, with whom he traveled to the Underworld to abduct Persephone, Hades's wife. When Hades discovered the heroes' plot, he imprisoned the pair in a slab of rock.

Pluto the Roman god of death and riches; Greek form: Hades

Pomerian line the city limits of New Rome; an interior magic defensive border

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades; Roman form: Neptune

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event; symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and anxiety

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

principia the officers' headquarters

probatio (probatii, pl.) a new recruit in a legion

Prometheus the Titan of crafty counsel, foresight, and forethought; he gave humans the gift of fire

rudis (rudes, pl.) a wooden training sword

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man

shadow-travel a form of transportation that allows creatures of the Underworld and children of Hades to travel to any desired place on earth or in the Underworld, although it makes the user extremely fatigued

skatá píta Greek for *turd pie*

Senatus Populusque Romanus **(**SPQR**)** "The Senate and People of Rome"; refers to the government of the Roman Republic and is used as an official emblem of Rome

spatha a cavalry sword

strix an owl-like creature that feeds on human flesh and is considered a bad omen

Stygian iron a magical metal, forged in the River Styx, capable of absorbing the very essence of mythics and injuring mortals, gods, Titans, and giants. It has a significant effect on ghosts and creatures from the Underworld.

Stymphalian bird a man-eating bird with a beak made of bronze; its feathers are sharp and can be shot at humans

Tantalus King of Phrygia, son of Zeus; the most notorious criminal from the Fields of Punishment, who'd tried to serve the gods a stew made from his own son. For that, he was sentenced to be forever hungry and thirsty, unable to grasp any food or drink.

Tartarus consort of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; the lowest part of the Underworld

telkhine a sea demon with flippers instead of hands, and a dog's head

tepidarium the warm-water room in a Roman bath

Terminus Roman god of boundaries

Terpsichore the Muse of dance and choral songs

tessera (tesserae, pl.) a tile from a mosaic; tesserae are Camp Jupiter's equivalent of Iris-messaging by which users tap a tile piece from a consecrated mosaic of the goddess Iris to create a hi-def video chat with an individual or group

Theseus a Greek demigod son of Poseidon who killed the Minotaur in the Labyrinth

Thyone the mother of Dionysus and the goddess of frenzy; her mortal name was Semele

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy. Rome was founded on its banks. In ancient Rome, executed criminals were thrown into the river.

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Ouranos, who ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

troglodyte one of a race of cave-dwelling reptilian humanoids who enjoy eating lizards and wearing hats

Underworld the realm of the dead

ventus (**venti**, pl.) invisible wind spirit

Veritas the Roman god of truth; Greek form: Aletheia, goddess of honesty

Vesper the Roman god of dusk

Via Praetoria the road that leads to the main gates of Camp Jupiter

Via Principalis the main north-south road that cuts through the middle of the buildings in Camp Jupiter

viviere Italian for *to live*

Zeus the Greek god of the sky and king of the gods; Roman form: Jupiter

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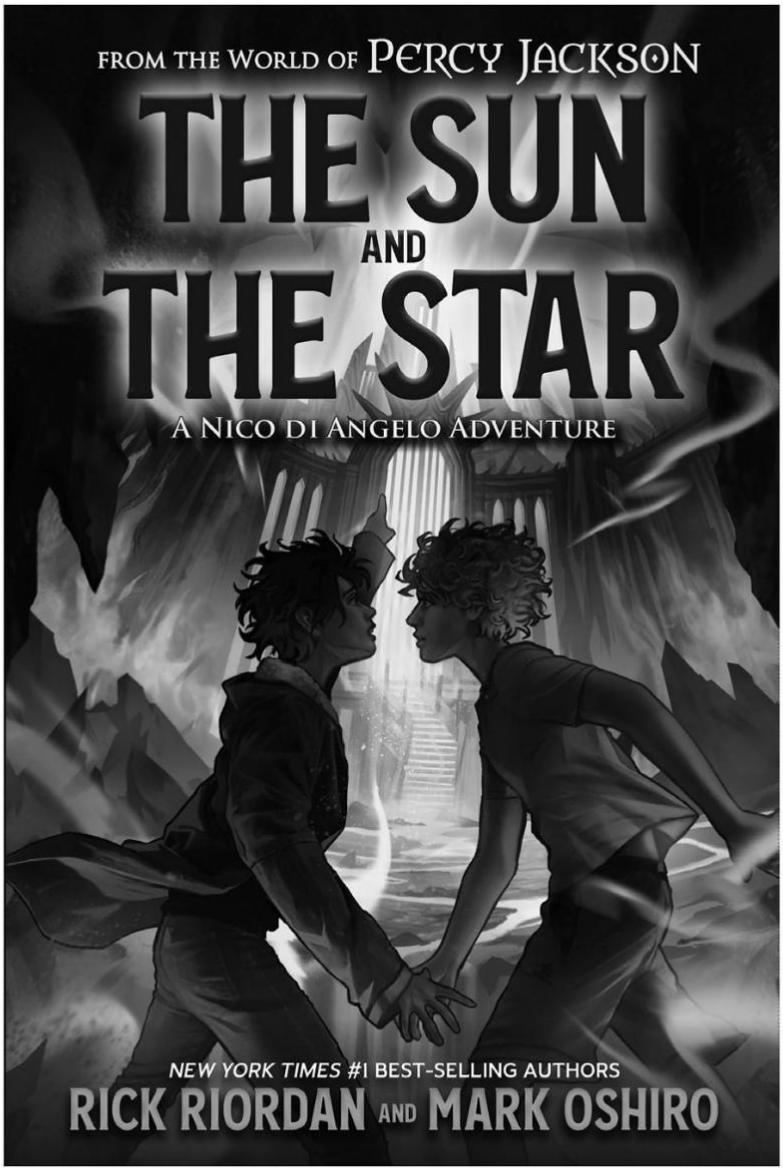
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